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Reborn to Master the Blade: From **Hero-King** to Extraordinary Squire ♀

Author: Hayaken
Illustrator: Nagu



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Chapter I: Inglis, Age 15—The Two Princes (1)

The scene: Alcard, at the camp near Leclair's ruins. The situation: Alcardian forces previously stationed at the Karelia border were now approaching. Those forces' leader: Lahti's older brother, Prince Windsel.

Leclair was no longer under threat from the Highlanders or the hial menace Tiffanyer, who'd ruled there, destroyed the town, and with the Floating Circle had taken away even the land on which it once stood. Nevertheless, under the leadership of Prince Lahti, who had liberated the area, work continued to return Leclair to its former glory.

In this position, one would hardly expect conflict among their troops, yet Prince Windsel's army was on the march.

"Achoo!" Lahti sneezed loudly. He was in one of the temporary barracks in the camp, planning their response along with Pullum, Captain Lewin, Leone, and Liselotte.

"Lahti, are you okay? Your nose is dripping. Come on, hold still and let me wipe it," Pullum said.

"I can do it myself!" Lahti protested.

"Prince Lahti. You're very important, which makes your health equally important. You must take good care of yourself," Captain Lewin advised.

"Yeah, but at times like this—"

"It's precisely because things are dire. There's no doubt that you, personally, are their target. We mustn't let anything happen to you. That would be catastrophic for morale."

Lewin's read on the situation was correct. The time for the army to move to protect Alcard from foreign enemies had passed. The Highlanders had left, and the Karelian army on the border had likewise fallen back. What lay ahead was civil war in Alcard—a struggle for dominance between Prince Lahti and Prince Windsel. Or at least, what chroniclers at a distance would describe as such.

Lahti sighed deeply. "Of all the times for my brother to—I didn't think he was the kind of person who would do something like this."

Liselotte leaned close to Leone and whispered, "Leone, you should make sure to take good care of yourself as well."

"Huh? Oh, of course." Leone couldn't recall the last time someone

had said that to her. She nodded, grateful that Liselotte showed that much concern for her.

“I know you’ve been training in the woods at night. You’re working on using draconic power—on using dragon lore more effectively, are you not? I heard the roars of a dragon from far away.”

“Huh?” Inglis had told Leone that her Artifact seemed to contain dragon lore, the power of a dragon. She had been able to create phantasms, which were a sort of semi-material projection serving as a dragon’s guardians. There had been the sound of a dragon’s roar at the same time.

However, Inglis and Rafinha had set off to support Rafael in his battle against the revived Prismers three days before, and Leone hadn’t trained at night since then. She’d slept like a log every night; she’d heard no such roars.

“Liselotte, that—” Before she could finish, the door to the barracks slammed open.

“Prince Lahti! Sir Lewin! I bear Prince Windsel’s response!” said the knight, rushing in with a letter. Lewin had sent him as a messenger to Prince Windsel’s forces to inquire about their intent and purpose in marching on Leclair. At the same time, he had sent another messenger to Alcard’s capital, warning of impending civil war.

“Good work. Can I see it?” Lahti thanked the knight as he took the letter he bore. Scanning over it, his expression darkened to one layered with anger and sadness. “Achoo! Dammit!”

“Which was that for? The sneeze or the letter?” Pullum asked as she moved to wipe his nose.

“Both! But seriously, I can wipe it myself!”

Leone laughed.

“They get along so well,” Liselotte remarked with a smile.

But the vital matter at present was the contents of the letter.

“Your Royal Highness, may I see the letter?” Lewin asked.

“Yeah, sure. Read it out.”

Lewin did so, making sure that Leone and Liselotte could hear. “It reads, ‘Leclair is not liberated at the moment, rather occupied by Prince Lahti, who has colluded with Karelia to sell out Alcardian soil. We are the ones who will truly liberate Leclair!’ A plausible blend of fact and fiction.”

Pullum was livid. “I can’t believe it! Leone and Liselotte, and Inglis and Rafinha even though they’re not here right now, struggled so hard for the sake of the people of Leclair! That’s terrible!”

“But it is true that we collaborated with Lahti to infiltrate Alcard. Collusion, I can see. It’s the ‘occupation’ part that disturbs me,” Leone said.

“I suppose Prince Windsel’s claim will ring as true as ours,”

Liselotte pondered. “Sir Lewin, do they have any demands?”

“Yes. First, the removal of the Karelian knights beyond Alcard’s borders. Second, the exile of Prince Lahti. Third, the handing over of the lands of Leclair.”

“Those are... Hmm, perhaps...” Liselotte trailed off.

Leone understood what she meant—that there might be room to consider those demands.

There was no problem with the removal of the knights of Karelia—that was Leone and Liselotte themselves, and they had always planned on returning home when their mission was complete. As for Lahti’s exile, even if he did comply, perhaps the king could be persuaded to revoke that later. It was Prince Windsel’s demand, not a royal decree. They had already written to the capital, and while Prince Windsel was the king’s adoptive son, Prince Lahti was his own flesh and blood. Once he knew the circumstances, the king would likely arrange for Lahti’s return.

“It may be a trap, but still...” Leone said. They had to be prepared for the case of such a trap being the precursor for the prince’s sending an assassin while Lahti’s guard was down, but that would be Leone and Liselotte’s time to shine. Even if worse came to worst, defending Lahti from an assassin would involve fewer needless deaths than facing down an entire army. However, what Lewin said next flipped their plans upside down.

“And fourth, handing over Lady Pullum. Those are all of his demands.”

Everyone else gasped. “Wh—!”

Pullum’s brother Harim had sided with Tiffanyer and joined in the ravaging of the area. He had originally been an administrator with a promising future, the scion of a family with ministerial rank. The people’s resentment at such a betrayal was great. While Pullum herself had done nothing wrong, they made her the next closest target for their anger. That was what this was about. And that was why the demand was unacceptable.

“I retract that. I will fight to the bitter end!” Leone insisted.

Liselotte was just as adamant. “I will as well! That demand is simply unacceptable!”

“B-But—” Pullum stammered. “Except for the part about me, it’s not that bad...”

“Oh, quiet down!” Lahti barked, covering her mouth with his hand, silencing any response she tried to give. “We’ve already gone through this over and over!”

“Yes, indeed!” Liselotte said.

“Good job, Lahti!” Leone said.

Pullum may have wanted to suggest handing herself over, but that

was unthinkable. If he had ever considered such an option, Lahti wouldn't have proclaimed before the entire encampment that he was going to take her as his queen. Leone and Liselotte had been moved by that scene, so they respected his decision here.

"Sorry for pushing this mess on you two..." Lahti said.

"No, we're all in the same boat," Liselotte replied.

"Don't worry about it," Leone agreed.

Meanwhile, Lewin spoke to Pullum admonishingly. "Lady Pullum, if I may add one more thing. If Prince Lahti is exiled, it's likely that he will never be able to return to Alcard. So even if you sacrifice yourself, it will be difficult to achieve the result you hope for."

"Huh? What do you mean, Sir Lewin?" Pullum asked the question that was on everyone's mind, and the room quietly listened for Lewin's response.

"Unfortunately, I believe the king will soon lose his authority."

"What?!" Lahti gasped. "Why?! You're saying my dad's sick? Or is someone planning to assassinate him?!"

"No. I believe he must, inevitably, abdicate soon. The fact that he both prepared an invasion of a major country such as Karelia, and sent assassins against its king, cannot be forgotten. As soon as the current matter is settled, His Majesty must beg forgiveness from Karelia and attempt to improve relations. And to accomplish that, a change in our posture will be necessary—at the minimum, His Majesty taking responsibility for the situation and abdicating."

"Ah...! Yeah, I guess you're right... From Karelia's perspective, they'd want more than just an apology..." Lahti said.

"Even worse, they may demand His Majesty's suicide, cession of land, war reparations, or other conditions. To avoid this, it's vital that we move quickly to smooth things over. Or perhaps, with news of Leclair's liberation, a peace offer has already been made."

"Yeah...the sooner the better."

"And Prince Lahti, if you were to be exiled in those circumstances... Even if His Majesty's last decree is your return as heir, who would listen to the orders of a king who is no longer? If Prince Windsel opposes such a move and denounces His Majesty, the royal court will surely feel that the longer the situation drags on, the more likely it is that Karelia will see it as duplicity and resume the war. They would side with Prince Windsel and force immediate abdication. That would be the safest course for them. Do you understand? To leave the country now would mean a permanent end to your hopes of succession and a lifelong parting with Lady Pullum. I cannot recommend that course of action."

"You've got a good read on this situation, Lewin. All right, I'm not gonna just sit back and see what comes to me. You get that, right,

Pullum?"

"I-I do! Sorry. I'm sorry! I won't say anything like that again!"

Pullum nodded, her expression serious.

"My opinion is largely based on my discussions of the situation with Inglis before she departed. She had predicted that such demands might be made," Lewin said.

Lahti laughed. "I really can't figure out how she does it. She sees through everything. Did she have anything else to say?"

"Yes. She said that while a temporary retreat here would be tantamount to complete defeat, we could instead seize on the opportunity of Prince Windsel's advance to settle the matter of succession right here."

As Lewin repeated Inglis's advice, Leone nodded. "Inglis's observations always strike the mark in this sort of situation. And I imagine she also meant she believes we can pull it off."

"It wouldn't do to fail to live up to her expectations," Liselotte said. "But our forces only number a few knights. We're rather unavoidably outnumbered."

"Yes, which means it's up to us ourselves!" Leone responded. "But there's no way we'd be able to just knock them all out like Inglis wanted to. So, we need to be prepared."

Prepared for war, she meant. They had fought other people before, to be sure, but this would be their first time in a true pitched battle.

"Honestly, I would prefer to fight magicite beasts...but I shall not back down. If this be our only path forward, it is one I shall not stray from."

Lewin was happy to see Leone and Liselotte nod to each other. He turned to the messenger. "Were you able to scout the enemy's equipment as I asked? How many Flygears and how many Flygear Ports do they have?"

"Few," the messenger replied. "Only enough for patrols and to carry supplies, I believe."

"I see! Then, they can't airlift their entire force—they'll have to march!"

"Yes, their Flygears and Flygear Ports are only sufficient to act as support."

"Excellent! Then, I have a plan." Lewin nodded. He was determined.

"A plan?! What is it, Lewin?!" Lahti asked.

"Yes. This is something else I discussed with Inglis. We came to a shared understanding that, given how outnumbered we are, it would be reckless to attempt a head-on attack. We'd need some sort of plan."

"Wait, didn't she wanna just charge in and knock 'em all out? Is that somehow not a head-on attack while outnumbered?"

“In that event, we could consider Inglis herself our plan, I believe,” Lewin declared with a serious expression.

Lahti laughed. “I guess it just comes down to how you describe it—or describe *her*.” He appreciated Lewin’s wit.

“Meaning, when we’re talking about her, numbers don’t matter,” Leone mused.

“Yes, indeed,” Liselotte added. “There’s no other way to phrase it.”

“Is the plan you designed with Inglis something we can do?” Pullum asked Lewin.

“Of course, Lady Pullum. Inglis may seem to be the incarnation of brute force, but she also has a very sharp mind. She’s well suited to becoming a chancellor or a strategist... Even though she couldn’t fight alongside us, she left us with useful words. I’m sure we’ll be able to overcome our disadvantages.” As Lewin spoke, he rolled a map of the environs out on the table.

“We must prepare immediately, leave this camp, and lay in wait. Our position will be...here.” He pointed to a long defile just south of the camp, which ran from east to west, and a bridge there. The forests lining the road on both the north and south sides of the bridge were marked on the map. His finger lay on the forests to the north. It would be the first thing the enemy would encounter after their crossing.

“The bridge at Leara Gorge? If it’s a bridge, they can’t all come over at once. So, a surprise attack during the crossing?” Lahti asked.

“No. It will be an open assault. Though we will have something of a disguise. I’ll explain the details as we go. If the enemy manages to pass through here, the plan won’t work, and we’ll be racing against time. As soon as I explain, be ready for action. And, Leone, Liselotte...we have a plan, but in the end, we’re relying on your valor. I thank you for your cooperation.”

“You can count on us!”

“Indeed!”

With the war council brought to an end, Leone and Liselotte rushed to prepare—which meant resuming a task they were very familiar with.

“Isn’t this just what we do every day?!” Leone put all her strength into thrusting her dark greatsword Artifact into a dragon’s tail. This was something she’d done over and over since the camp at Leclair was established—cutting dragon meat. Today, as always, even in this situation, the earnest girl dripped sweat as she put her hands to work.

“We don’t have a choice in the matter. This is necessary work.” Liselotte was sweating too.

“I guess so... But wow, Inglis really does like these tails. She eats them, she makes weapons out of them, now she’s come up with a

tactic using them.”

“I mean, they are said to cure both wounds and illnesses. Honestly, I rather like them too. Hasn’t all the time we spent cutting them improved our Artifacts?”

Draconic power—known as dragon lore—rested in their Artifacts as a result of the amount of dragon meat they’d cut. The dragon lore had seeped into their weapons. In Inglis’s case, she had taken the dragon lore into herself due to the prodigious amount of dragon meat she’d eaten.

“Yeah. It’s been good training, but I guess this is it. Let’s do our best!”

“Yes. This time, everyone is helping, so I suppose we’ll be done quicker!”

It wasn’t just the two of them tasked with carving meat from the dragon’s tail. This time, Lahti and Pullum, all the knights, and even the civilians helped. It was truly an all-hands effort.

“Hurry up, everyone! Once we’re done, we can move all of this into place!” Lewin ordered. The crowd cheered in response.

The work was complete before long, and the dragon’s tail, emptied of flesh, was carried to the bridge at Leara Gorge that Lewin had marked out as the site where they would meet the oncoming army.



Whoooooosh!

The cold wind howled in Liselotte’s ears and beat at her cheeks. The sky was dark, and sporadic gusts of snow limited her vision—but it was perfect weather for hiding. She had no worries about the main squad being caught. All that was left was for her, flying as a lookout above the forest where they concealed themselves, to endure the cold.

Compared to a Flygear’s bulky airframe and the hum of its engine, the pale wings granted by her Gift were small and quiet, making them perfect for reconnaissance. Scouting was her responsibility; she was the only one who could do it secretly in this situation.

“Still, it is rather cold up here.” She’d bundled up as tightly as possible, but the cold cut through to her bones. “Ugh, if they’re coming, I wish they’d hurry up and arrive! Even my wings are going to freeze!”

Well, she doubted a Gift could actually freeze, but the cold was getting to her.

“Ah—?!” At the furthest reach of her vision, obscured by the blowing snow, she nearly missed them—there were soldiers marching toward the bridge over Leara Gorge.

“They’ve arrived! Let the operation begin!” She dropped into the forest which lay past the bridge on their path.

There, the first thing that came to eye were dragon tails showily propped into the road from the woods—three of them, in fact. Their bases were planted in large white clumps, large enough when viewed from a distance to be massive bodies in proportion. Surely, they looked to the enemy like bodies covered in snow and rime. Of course, they were fakes meant to deceive the enemy, made with the blizzard-generating dragon lore which was invested in Liselotte’s Artifact.

“Everyone! I’ve spotted the enemy! Are you prepared?”

“Liselotte! Good work!” Leone’s face popped out from one of the snowy forms. The insides were hollowed out so that people could conceal themselves, and in each a dozen or so people were lying in wait.

“Prince Lahti, give the order!”

At Lewin’s call, Lahti nodded. “All right! Go for it, everyone! Make ’em move like they’re really alive!”

“Yes!” The knights, along with volunteers recruited from among the civilians, set to work, crawling into the bodies and then into the tails...

Rattle, rattle, rattle! Fwoosh!

Moving the frameworks constructed within from side to side to sweep around the dragonskin on top, they made the tails look as if they were alive. Not only that, but—

“My turn!” Leone sent a phantasm from her dark greatsword into the sky.

“*Grrrooooooar!*” The phantasm’s roar pierced the snowy skies.

Tremendous creatures appeared to be lurking in the woods on the far side of the bridge, swinging their tails and roaring. When seen from the other side, it must have been quite intimidating.



“Prince Windsel! Prince Windsel! Ill tidings!” To the rear of the column marching toward Leclair, before its young commander, barely over twenty, a panicked messenger appeared.

“What’s wrong?!” Windsel answered, his voice filled with gravity but not lacking in confidence. The steed he rode had an exceptionally impressive physique—its coat black with a red dapple, its mane and tail also red. Its tail in particular resembled a gout of flame in the shape of a tail, and the snow melted where it touched the ground. Clearly, it was no ordinary horse. Windsel himself exuded a calm self-assurance ill befitting his age, one which rapidly spread to the

messenger.

“Gigantic magicite beasts are lurking in the woods across the bridge before us!”

“What?! Magicite beasts?! Very well, I’ll see for myself. Thank you for your report!”

Windsel spurred his steed forth, to the head of the column. Its speed was unnatural. On level ground, even a Flygear would have a hard time giving chase. Reaching the vanguard and gazing out over Leara Gorge, he saw—even in poor visibility—the great forms lurking on the other side. “Ah...! That’s a rather large magicite beast, is it not?”

Stout tails like bundles of logs, snow-covered bodies the size of hills... He imagined what would be revealed when they roused themselves fully.

“Grrroooooooooohn!”

Their roars, carried on the wind, rattled his soldiers.

“Ahh! What are those monstrous beasts?!”

“If they’re there...are they going to attack us if we continue our advance?”

“But there’s no other way forward!”

“Grrrooooooooooar!”

Another roar.

“Aaaah!” The soldiers had completely lost their nerve. As was common in Alcard’s armies, few possessed the strength of Artifacts. It was difficult for any country not as great as Karelia or as militaristic as Venefic to compose their forces solely of Artifact-wielders.

Furthermore, the threadbare poverty of Alcard’s lands was reflected in its government. They simply couldn’t afford to procure that kind of weaponry. If tasked with the invasion of Karelia—that is, with fighting other humans—a force lacking in Artifacts would still pass muster, but against magicite beasts, normal weapons would simply be ineffective. Thus, those without Artifacts were especially terrified.

Even Windsel had never seen such huge magicite beasts before. “Calm down! I do not intend to order my best men into combat to do battle with such beasts without the aid of Artifacts! We halt! We will camp among those trees, to break the wind!” Windsel pointed to the woods before the bridge as he gave his order. His forces would face the gigantic beasts across the gorge, separated by the bridge. “And not only that, but three of them... Lahti, did you really expect me to

believe that the increase in magicite beasts here was a Highlander diversion?"

As his forces moved into the woods and began setting up camp, Windsel continued to give orders. "Knights with Artifacts, leave setting up camp to the others and gather to me! We will prepare a plan to deal with the magicite beasts blocking our path!"

In truth, he had already formed his plan. There was simply no reason to send soldiers without Artifacts into battle with magicite beasts. A handpicked elite would do.

About an hour or so later, Windsel addressed his knights again.

"Then, I order you, my elite, to conduct a contact patrol against the magicite beasts. Scout them out up close, and reply to any aggression in kind, but don't go too deep. If you see that you're no match for the enemy, turn back. Your top priority should be avoiding any casualties."

"Yes!" Windsel's chosen knights replied to his order.

"Then, go! Fall out!"

The knights' Flygears took to the sky. Windsel's forces were limited in their number of Flygears, but a small detachment could make full use of them. Watching the Flygears recede into the distance, Windsel let out a private sigh. If he'd handled this himself to begin with, it would already be over. But there would inevitably have been objections to a commander being the first into battle against unknown enemies. To avoid those objections, he was forced to let his subordinates take the lead at first. Only if they encountered setbacks could he take the field.

"This isn't like me. But if it's for this country's sake, I'll do it. That's how I repay favors," Windsel muttered to himself.

The knights aboard the Flygears had drawn close to the magicite beasts lurking in the woods across the gorge.

"Grrrooooooar! Grrroooooohhhhn!"

The roars of the magicite beasts became more lively, the sweep of their tails more intense.

"Ah!"

"Did...did they notice us?!"

The knights paused for a moment, halting their Flygears. The roars had become louder, but the beasts showed no sign of rousing themselves from their snowdrifts or going on the attack.

"They might have noticed us, but they're not attacking..."

"Let's get a little closer!"

"Carefully, though! Prince Windsel ordered us to be careful!"

"All right, here I go..."

They drew closer. Carefully, slowly, sloooooowly...

"The closer we get, the bigger they look."

"Yeah, they're huge..."

"If they get up and attack us..."

The knights drew yet closer.

"Aren't we about in range for a ranged attack with our Artifacts?"

"All right, let's fire on them and see what they do!"

"Okay, going for it!"

Balls of flame and blades of wind sprang forth from the knights' Artifacts, but the attacks simply dissipated when they struck the tails, leaving not even a scratch.

"It didn't work?!"

"I guess we have to close in and try at point-blank range."

"But that's dangerous!"

"No, look. Even though we attacked them, they're not responding. We can get a bit closer."

"That's right. Maybe they're stuck in the snow."

"Ha ha ha, wouldn't that be great?"

"We should try getting even closer. If they don't attack even when we're right up next to them, we don't even have to fight them—we can just ignore them and go around."

The other knights agreed with that assessment.

"Yeah, you're right."

"Let's give it a try!"

"Don't let your guard down!"

And, as the knights descended very close to the gigantic tail, the world suddenly went black around them.

"Wh—?!"

"Wh-What?!"

The white landscape, the snowy wind—darkness overtook all. They were still aboard their Flygears, but it was so dim that they couldn't even tell where the ground was.



"Now, Liselotte!" Leone shouted after activating her Gift.

This dark sub-dimension was a power of her greatsword Artifact. It created a separate dimension and isolated the people in range within it. It had first been prepared by Ambassador Theodore to allow them to fight the magicite beasts summoned by Ripple without collateral damage, but here it found another use.

This was key to the plan Inglis had left them with. The enemy would be forced to advance through terrain that was decorated with Fufailbane's tails.

Dragons, of course, were not an everyday sight, so those who saw

them would assume that they were magicite beasts.

Furthermore, ordinary soldiers were no match for magicite beasts. Knights wielding Artifacts would be sent in response. Because Alcard possessed very few Artifacts, the elite forces that were available would be small in number.

According to the plan, Leone's Gift would trap and neutralize them inside the dimension. There would be at most a dozen—few enough that Leone and Liselotte could handle them themselves!

"Yes! Leave it to me!" Liselotte activated her Gift and spread her wings, swooping behind the Flygear-mounted knights.

"Huh?! What's that?!" Her speed was beyond what normal knights or their Flygears could manage. Their slow, sluggish reaction was exactly what she needed.

"You'll have to be quicker than that!" Liselotte thrust her halberd Artifact forward. It glowed a faint light blue.

Fssssh!

The dragon-jaw-like tip of the halberd unleashed a fierce, glistening blizzard. Her weapon had only somewhat recently taken on this shape, after being permeated with dragon lore. The intensity of the blizzard, formed by a fragment of the ancient dragon's power, was extraordinary. Inglis had said that, among Fufailbane's many powers, his breath was one of his most lethal.

Even as a fragment of his power, it was far beyond a normal Artifact's Gift. If it hit a human directly, they would be frozen before being torn apart and crushed by the wind, so Liselotte aimed at their Flygear. She swept the blade of her halberd to the side, and the dragon's breath, radiating over a wide area, caught their craft and instantly froze it in place.

"Whoa!"

"We're falling!"

Frozen, the Flygear plummeted downward—to where Leone was waiting. She had already wound up a forceful strike with her greatsword. "Sorry for being so rough!"

She activated her Gift, and the greatsword sprung forth, sweeping the falling knights away.

"Whoa!"

"Aaaagh!"

It was a sweep, but with the flat of the blade. She bowled over the knights with her fearsome sword, knocking them all to the ground.

"All right!" If this was what the enemy could bring, Leone had room when working with Liselotte to overwhelm them without taking their lives. Against a larger assault on the camp, she wouldn't have

been able to do so. She would not hesitate were it necessary, but if possible, she wanted to minimize casualties among both friend and foe. After all, they were all human.

Lahti, to the rear, gave the order. "Everyone, tie them up so they can't move! Quick! While they're knocked out!"

"Yes, sir!" Lewin, the knights, and the civilian volunteers moved as one. Activating the Gift in an area wide enough to consume the enemy knights had inevitably drawn them in as well. But that wasn't all bad, as the extra hands made it possible to quickly bind the subdued enemy knights.

"Leone! Excellent work!"

"You too, Liselotte! That really helped!"

"No, no. Rather than me, it was all thanks to this!" Liselotte happily clutched her Artifact to her cheek. She'd grown quite enamored with dragon lore.

"Ha ha ha, I see you've taken a shine to it."

"Yes! While my Gift of wings is handy for moving fast and covering a wide area, it simply can't do a thing about what I *find* there. All I can do is cleave and thrust at close range...but with the dragon's breath, I can spread a powerful attack over a broad area! I believe it's quite effective at covering for my own weaknesses."

"I guess so... I'm counting on you next time too!"

"Leave it to me! Thanks to Inglis, we can fight without worries!" Liselotte smiled.



With Inglis and Lewin's plan, they wouldn't have to face a mass frontal assault by the enemy; instead, they could simply continue to repel small groups of knights coming to hunt magicite beasts. They could remain unchallenged enough to capture, rather than kill, their foes. Additionally, that would relieve some of the burden on Leone and Liselotte to keep their own forces safe.

Inglis had probably thought that far ahead when advising Lewin of the plan. As unusually passionate—if not obsessive—as she became over her own battles, breaking away from the beaten path into the completely ineffable, when contemplating others' battles, she was a receptive, reliable ally with a keen sense for human emotion.

"Leone! We've tied them all up! You can bring us back now!" Pullum said.

She hadn't taken part in the fight. After all, her harp Artifact's Gift enhanced the performance of nearby Artifacts. If she had used it then, the enemy's Artifacts would have been bolstered as well. It was fair to say that Pullum's power could find its true expression not in battles between knights armed with Artifacts, but only in those with inhuman foes like the magicite beasts. Because she understood her limitations, she had volunteered to join Lahti and others as support.

They pulled the knights away from where they had fallen, carefully bringing them to where Lahti and the others had first appeared. That way, when they returned from this dimension, they'd be inside the false magicite beast bodies with Lahti and the others.

"Of course! Here we go!" Leone replied.

If they continued this, they could eventually draw out and capture Prince Windsel, who commanded the enemy army. With their commander captured, the enemy would no longer offer resistance. After all, the other prince—Lahti—was on their side.

Leone and Liselotte had heard that Prince Windsel was a skilled knight with an upper-class Rune. Thus, he would eventually have to join in any planned attack on magicite beasts. If their other options had no chance, he'd have no choice but to deploy his most valuable force—himself. And he seemed to be a man who liked a good fight, so he would show up before long.

That would be the true battle—that was what Lewin had really meant when he'd said they were all relying on Leone and Liselotte.

Just as Leone thought, the enemy prince would soon arrive.

Chapter II: Inglis, Age 15—The Two Princes (2)

A few hours after intercepting the first group of knights, another squad of Flygear-mounted knights emerged from the woods on the far side of the bridge and approached. Peering out from a dummy magicite beast at the people in the detachment's lead Flygear, Lahti sharply remarked to Leone, "Here he comes! The one right up in front! That's my brother, Windsel!"

"Oh! Hmm... He isn't wasting any time."

"Inglis was right all along!" Liselotte remarked.

"And it's up to us to execute her plan!" Leone agreed.

They held their breath as they watched Windsel. Boldly, he alone alighted from the lead Flygear. He was gutsy. Once his knights had failed to return, he must have concluded that as the most powerful warrior among them, he would go forth to prevent further losses among his men. Leone found that admirable—but in this situation, they would use that against him!

She signaled to those around her with her eyes. When he approached a little bit closer, they'd make their move. This way, they could ignore the other knights and take only Windsel into the other dimension.

And...now! "Gift! Take us to the other dimension!" Leone planted her greatsword into the ground. Her vision twisted around her, and in the next moment her surroundings were replaced with a dark, empty void. Ahead of her, Prince Windsel stood alone. Things had gone according to plan so far. They'd successfully managed to isolate him after he came forward.

Now it was time to settle things!

"Liselotte! Let's go!"

"Yes, Leone!"

Leone rushed forth, Liselotte flying over her head. Prince Windsel didn't flinch as they approached. "Hmm. A Gift..." he muttered, utterly calm. "So your plan was to block the road with magicite beasts and pick off squads of Artifact-wielders as they came forth. Clever."

"If you think so, we'd appreciate it if you surrendered immediately!" Leone said.

"Unfortunately for you, you're alone, completely cut off!" Liselotte added.

“Hmm, you girls... You have upper-class Runes... You’re not Alcardians, then, are you? You’re not with Tiffanyer either. Then I suppose you ended up driving her out of Leclair. For that, and that alone, I thank you. I am in your debt.” Windsel bowed his head, leaving Leone and Liselotte puzzled.

“Oh, it was...” Leone trailed off, too surprised to finish.

“Y-You aren’t quite what we expected...” Liselotte remarked.

“R-Right...?” Leone had to agree. He seemed like someone they could talk over their differences with. They couldn’t help hoping for a better outcome now.

“I feel the same. You seem so innocent. Your good intent’s as clear as day... But don’t you realize what you’ve done? As one who must defend Alcard, whether Leclair is occupied by Tiffanyer or by knights of Karelia makes no difference. Whether you’re scum who abuse its people or no, the occupation must be resisted!”

“It’s not like that!” Leone protested.

“We didn’t intend to...” Liselotte said.

“Then, what were your intentions?” Windsel asked.

The two girls couldn’t look him in the eye.

They had traveled to this country to stop Alcard’s invasion of Karelia—to prevent Karelia from being caught between forces advancing from Alcard to the north and Venefic to the east. Their goal was to stop the invasion by sparking a coup, or to attack the invading army directly. There had been no clear-cut plan, only a goal, and a method of infiltrating Alcard. However, it was possible that this had only been the cover story for Inglis’s proposal to come to Alcard—and that her true goal had simply been to fight powerful foes.

If that was the case, the true goal had been accomplished and had worked out quite nicely for Leone and Liselotte themselves, but it was certainly nothing they could admit to Windsel. And those would have been Inglis’s goals, not Leone or Liselotte’s. Their own honest feelings were different.

“I-I came here to help Lahti and Pullum!” Leone insisted.

“Yes, we had no intention of invading! As soon as that’s finished, we will leave!” Liselotte agreed.

“That’s right, Windsel! Everyone’s just here to help me out!” Lahti added, coming up to the front. If they were going to talk things out with Windsel, it would be best to let him do most of the speaking.

“You’ve gotta stop this! We’ve already kicked the Highlanders out! They’re the ones who destroyed Leclair and tried to make it look like the magicite beasts did it! They had us fooled from the get-go. There’s no need for Alcardians to fight other Alcardians!” He desperately tried to persuade Windsel, but his brother’s expression didn’t change.

“I’ll say one thing... Invaders and their patsies always have such

words: 'It's for your country's sake.' 'Consider it aid.' Proclamations that they're simply lending their assistance. Don't you feel any shame at your hackneyed words?"

"Wha—?!"

"Ugh...!" Leone and Liselotte bit their lips, while Lahti stared at his feet.

"It's written all over your faces—your shame," Windsel continued.

"Eh?"

"Why do they proclaim such things? Not because they're fools. Because it's a simple expedient. A political convenience. To not understand that, to feel shame, it must be because those are the words of another... You're children being led by a pried piper."

And in truth, Inglis had been the one to orchestrate their overall plan. After Lewin had been rescued from his imprisonment in Leclair, he had joined in the planning. But from the beginning, the decision to go to Leclair had been Lahti's, and Inglis was only there to fill in the details around that. She wasn't manipulating them—she only provided the impetus to push Lahti's will along. That much was also true.

"No! I just couldn't stand to watch what Tiffanyer and Harim were doing! I saw Pullum suffering from it, and I knew I had to protect her!" Lahti insisted.

"And whose fault was that to begin with?" Windsel's expression hardened.

"What?! What did I do?!" Lahti shot back.

"Nothing at all!"

"Wha—?!"

"That hial menace... Tiffanyer was absolute scum. That much wasn't your fault. But what do you think was in Harim's heart, in the hearts of the others, as she enticed them? It was fear for the future of Alcard. Our father is old... And you, the crown prince, wandered off to 'find yourself' in another land, driven by some sense of inferiority! Your refusal to face up to this country planted that seed of doubt in their minds and gave Tiffanyer her opening! Have you no remorse for that?!" Windsel jabbed a finger at Lahti. On the back of his hand was something they recognized.

Leone and Liselotte gasped.

"A special-class Rune?!"

"I'd thought yours was upper-class!"

"Windsel?!" Lahti said. "When I left Alcard, you didn't—"



“Runes are mutable. Though it does require being inscribed by the baptismal tabernacle again!” Windsel clenched his fist. “Behold, Lahti! This is proof that I’ve been honing my strength for Alcard’s sake! I am prepared to face adversity for this country! While I was having this inscribed, what have you gained?! The ability to dance on strings for invaders calling themselves allies? I have lost all interest in supporting your rule as the next king! I will not take your life, but I will never allow you to set foot in Alcard again! You, or the Karelian invaders! And the traitor’s flesh and blood must be put to death!”

“Ugh...! You might be right about some things, but I’m not gonna back down! I’m not gonna run away from Alcard again! I will lead Alcard forth by my own will! That’s what I’ve decided! I’ve done some things I can’t take back, but there are still things I can do!”

“Ha! So you prattle, but you’re Runeless and can’t do a thing without relying on these little girls! Fancy words mean naught in the face of power! You may think you have me fooled, but this is a good situation for me as well. If I can crush you without harming the refugees of Leclair, that solves everything!”

Windsel shifted into a combat stance.

“Don’t make fun of me! I have my reasons too!”

As Lahti raised his voice, Leone stepped in between him and Windsel to fend Windsel off. “Lahti! Get back!”

“Leave the rest to us!” Liselotte said.

“Sorry, and thanks! I’m counting on you!” With a regretful expression on his face, Lahti backed away.

Windsel sighed. “It’s not in my nature to slay women, but if I have no choice...”

His comment gave Leone and Liselotte pause, having never been told something like that before, but they got serious quickly.

“Don’t hold back!”

“Karelian knights need no such mercy!”

Karelia, long blessed with hial menaces, had developed a deep respect for them. The country’s knights, having witnessed those powerful women who could transform into weapons, had come to understand that women too could make their might known in battle. Thus, they felt no hesitation or reluctance facing a woman. Windsel’s words rang discordantly to a Karelian—they were clearly from a man of a country without hial menaces.

“How brave of you. I suppose a knight is a knight, regardless of gender! I’ve taken a shine to you, whether or not you’re royal. Come, try to take my life!”

But with Windsel still not brandishing an Artifact, Leone was at a loss for how to approach him. Which weapon would a foe use?

Sword? Spear? Bow? Understanding that informed one on the distance to safely keep. He surely didn't have a hial menace, so he would be limited to upper-class Artifacts. But he still had a special-class Rune. So fighting him would be like fighting Rafael or Leon if they were unaccompanied—a step above herself or Liselotte. Leone had been focused in her training, working hard to catch up to Leon, but she still felt it was a lofty goal. Having to achieve it right here and now made her nervous.

“Leone!”

“Ah...! Liselotte...”

“You'll be fine! You're not alone! You have me, and I have you! We both have these new powers! We're stronger than we were!”
Liselotte did her best to inspire Leone.

Leone had said herself that she wanted to capture her brother Leon, who also had a special-class Rune, with her own hands, and wipe the dishonor from her family name. But watching her up close, Liselotte had noticed that, whether Leone wanted to admit it or not, she respected her brother. She looked up to him. Therefore, her goal of catching up to Leon must seem even higher, even further away, than it really was. Windsel, like Leon, had a special-class Rune. And that had some special meaning to Leone. Overestimating one's opponent led to unnecessary hesitance. That would spell trouble for them. She wouldn't be able to show her true potential.

It was to overcome that impulse that Liselotte made her bold statement. It wasn't wrong. After all, Inglis had said so too. When they'd asked just how strong they were now, she'd replied that two or three of them would be enough to handle a knight with a special-class Rune, if that knight wasn't wielding a hial menace. Liselotte, Rafinha, and Leone, each with good training and battle-hardened, bearing Artifacts with multiple Gifts or with dragon lore, were exceptionally strong even for knights with upper-class Runes.

Rafinha had grown up nearly a sister to Inglis, so she didn't ask such questions—it was as if she knew even without asking. Perhaps their assumption was simply that Inglis would always be by Rafinha's side, and there was no need to worry about it. Inglis's unconditional love for Rafinha was obvious.

Leone was somewhat of the brooding type and hadn't asked Inglis for such an evaluation out of fear that the answer may have been, “You have no chance against Leon.” Nevertheless, she did keep up well while training with Inglis.

But Liselotte was neither able to intuit the answer as Rafinha did nor as broody as Leone, so she'd been asking for such evaluations casually for some time. And that had been the most recent response.

Liselotte didn't know anyone as enthusiastic or knowledgeable

about battle as Inglis. That was why she was interested in her evaluation and had full faith that it was accurate. Inglis being Inglis, she could be expected to answer without sugarcoating her words. Once, Liselotte had asked Inglis who the second strongest in their class at the academy was behind Inglis herself, and she had answered with a profoundly hushed voice and a warning never to tell Rafinha that it was Leone. But she had also added that Rafinha and Liselotte were around the same level, half a step or so behind Leone. It would be good to hear how her evaluation had changed since then. But that would have to wait until after their safe return to Karelia.

Thankfully, Liselotte's encouragement seemed to break Leone's tension. "That's right! If we both work together—!"

"Yes, that's the stuff!" Their eyes met, and they nodded in agreement. "Then, I'll make the first move!" Liselotte took to the skies and circled around behind Windsel, pinching him between herself and Leone. Keeping her distance, she fired an intense blizzard from the dragon's-jaw-shaped tip of her halberd.

Fssssh!

Windsel still hadn't shown his Artifact. Attacking from a distance, with the advantage of the high ground, was the safest approach. As Leone readied a swing with her greatsword, she watched Windsel's movements. When she saw an opening, she would immediately extend her sword to attack.

"Ah, more than just a Gift of wings?"

As Windsel spoke, he leaped high to dodge. He would evade the blizzard, but Leone found his reaction a bit careless. Between leaping high and landing, he would have a hard time reorienting himself. Now was her chance.

He still doesn't know what my Gift is! "Then—!" Leone swung her sword down diagonally. At the same time, it sprang forward, increasing its range.

"I see. You won't miss an opening. However—!" Windsel made a strange motion in the air, as if he was tapping his greaves together. It seemed like a futile attempt at evasion—but evasion it was not. As if the tapping of his feet was a signal, a sturdy black horse with red dapple appeared immediately below him, and he fell into its saddle. The horse instantly leaped low and fast, moving out of range of Leone's sword. "I'm sorry, but that was no opening!"

"His Gift is a horse?!" His greaves were his Artifact, and that red-spattered black horse was his Gift. Knowing that Leon's preferred Artifact created lightning beasts, it wasn't impossible—but those beasts were obvious temporary manifestations, while this horse

seemed as if it were the real, living thing.

“Steed of flame, Sleipnir! My favored steed!” Windsel’s voice suddenly thundered. The proof this was his Gift was that the horse had rushed toward Leone at a tremendous speed, taking advantage of the opening left by her missed swing. Its heavy barding didn’t seem to affect it at all.

“Ah!” There was no time to dodge to the side, so fast was its charge. But Leone needed to find a way to avoid its onslaught. She pointed her sword toward the ground at her feet. “Extend!” Immediately thrusting forth, it sent her light form into the air, carrying her out of the horse’s path. The horse passed by where she had been, and Leone was about to land behind it—but just then, she saw a torrent of blue lightning rush before her eyes.

Its source was Windsel, who had already turned in the saddle to face her. Before she’d even noticed, he had freed his lance from the saddle and leveled it at her. It was short for a lance—the type that was easy to maneuver—and its tip was firing lightning. This was the power of a Gift.

I can’t dodge! It’s going to hit me! Just as Leone tensed in anticipation of the pain, something else collided with her, and the world turned sideways. Liselotte had slipped in and caught her in her arms.

“Liselotte! Thank you!”

“This was what I meant by working together!” After dodging, she set Leone down and again circled to pincer Windsel. In response, Windsel aimed at her in the air with his lightning. The horse’s hooves, for now, stood in place.

It was Leone’s turn to rush forward and close the gap at once. Her sword could not extend infinitely. A strike with the blade extended, from a distance, could result in the foe’s escaping to somewhere where it could not reach. But if she attacked close up, they’d have a hard time swiftly escaping even if they tried to dodge. If she wanted her blow to strike true, close range would be more reliable. It also meant less room for the horse to build up momentum.

“Yaaaah!” Holding her sword low, she swung it upward at Windsel from a distance of around ten paces. At the same time, she would activate her Gift to cover that distance—or so Windsel thought. But the sword’s blade did not extend.

“Grooooooar!”

Instead, a phantasm roared and rushed at him.

This unfamiliar attack took Windsel’s full attention, and he intercepted the stream of phantasms closing in on him with lightning

from his lance.

As he did, Leone took advantage of the opening, zigzagging forward.

“Over here! Yaaaah!” This time she struck from up close, taking her sword overhand to strike down at Windsel and his horse.

Windsel raised his empty left hand into its path. He wasn’t trying to evade at all. *Is he trying to block it with his hand? There’s no way that will work.*

But the horse’s tail moved nimbly, as if it had a will of its own, plucking another lance from the saddle and placing it in Windsel’s hand.

Claaang!

The lance and the greatsword met with a thunderous clatter.

“In that case...” *I’ll test his strength! His weapon is in only one hand. Mine is in both!* Despite their difference in pure strength, Leone was gradually pushing down. But before she could complete her strike, the lance in Windsel’s right hand, which had been devoted to handling the phantasms, had defeated them and could be used freely again.

“You’ll need more than that!” he barked. The lance thrust downward toward Leone.

“No, you won’t!” Leone immediately let up the pressure with her sword and leaped. Using Windsel’s own push upward, she felt herself float up and away from the lance’s thrust. Aiming for her landing point, a band of flame darted from the lance in Windsel’s left hand. This one seemed to have a flame Gift. But she’d already expected him to aim where she’d land.

Leone pointed her greatsword down and to the side, and extended its blade. It brushed the ground at an angle, changing her landing point. The flame missed, and Leone immediately brandished her sword, unleashing more phantasms.

Windsel’s right-hand lance immediately leaped to intercept them. But before he could finish...

“One more time!” The dark sword swung again, once more unleashing phantasms. The dragon lore which created them, unlike a Gift, could be used over and over without exhausting Leone. Rather than using her Rune as a conduit to draw forth her power, the dragon lore itself was imbued in her sword. She didn’t know if she could keep using it without it eventually running out, but so far it seemed that way. Its endurance was astounding.

“More, more!” *Again, again!* A vast number of phantasms swarmed toward Windsel.

“Well, then! You’re better than I thought!” The lance in Windsel’s

left hand joined in intercepting the phantasms.

Meaning his hands are full. Now! “Yaaaah!” Leone forcefully thrust her sword. This time, instead of phantasms, the blade extended, weaving its way through the swarm of phantasms toward his throat.

“Gah!” Windsel twisted in his saddle, avoiding the thrust at his throat.

But now he was off balance. If she swept her blade to the side while continuing to extend it, she could cut him down! “Got you!” Leone put the image in her head into action.

However, the horse leaped as if sliding to the side. It moved faster than Leone’s sword. It was astonishingly fast.

As it landed, it stomped at the ground and charged straight toward her.

As though it was bounding over her swing. The horse’s speed had turned the tables. Her sword was fully extended, swinging to the side after a miss. As it leaped toward her, Windsel regained his balance.

“There!” A flurry of jabs from both lances bore down on Leone. Having just attacked and missed, she had no chance to open a gap. Her defensive movements wouldn’t be sufficient to predict and evade so many attacks.

Then I’ll—! Leone activated her Gift again. The breadth of her sword expanded many times, and she slipped it between herself and Windsel as a shield.

Klank! Klank! Klank!

“Guh! Ughhh...” Her blade struck by the lance over and over, Leone was pushed back but managed to survive the assault.

“Not bad, for a mere woman! I’m impressed!” Windsel grinned, one which seemed to Leone almost like an expression of languor.

So he feels he has that much leeway, Leone thought. *But I will not bend. I will not break. I can’t lose. I believe in Liselotte fighting alongside me. He may be strong, but I can handle this.*

“My gender has nothing to do with this! The strongest person I know is a girl!” she answered as she fenced with his lances.

“If you know someone like that, I’d like to meet her!”

“It’d be better if you didn’t. You might lose your confidence!”

Leone was somewhat curious how Windsel, who seemed to be very sure of himself, would react if Inglis confronted him. She was certain those physical blows would be mental blows as well.

“I doubt it! Men do not follow those who do not believe in themselves!” Windsel’s work with his lances was fast and strong. Unable to keep up with the speed, Leone had used her Gift to broaden her sword and use it as a shield, but this in turn reduced her chances

to counterattack, and she felt herself gradually being pushed back by force. But if she could hold out...

“Tahhhh!” Liselotte dove toward Windsel’s back. With the force of her speedy flight behind it, her halberd thrust forth. Windsel’s lances were both occupied with Leone.

His back was undefended.

Liselotte’s caught him in his blind spot!

But the thrust stopped midway with a metallic *thunk!*

“Ah—?!”

A metal shield—part of the horse’s barding had pulled off and moved on its own. It moved unaided as a shield and blocked Liselotte’s aerial thrust.

“A shield Artifact?!” Leone gasped. That Gift would probably move as was just seen, independently protecting its user. It was surely because he had access to such a Gift that Windsel had left an opening, enticing Liselotte to attack.

“Ah, how nice of you to drop in!” His words made it very clear. A horse, two lances, and a shield to protect Windsel on its own. Each was an upper-class Artifact. He may have had others as well. Just how many Artifacts could he use at once? This was the power of one with a special-class Rune, who could wield any Artifact. It stood as undeniable proof that he was a superior opponent.

“Leone! Get back!” Liselotte stayed at the same range, and unleashed a blizzard from the tip of her halberd.

Fssssh!

But Windsel’s shield moved to block it, dispersing the wind and ice. At the same time, Leone saw the horse’s tail move and lengthen, trying to bind her feet from her blind spot.

“Liselotte! Your feet! The horse’s tail!” But Liselotte didn’t seem to hear her voice. “Liselotte! Can’t you hear me?” Leone called out again, to no avail.

“It seems it’s just a little too noisy!” Windsel’s voice entered her ears.

It was then that Leone realized. This was because of the blizzard Liselotte had conjured. Windsel was pincered between them, and Liselotte’s blizzard blew from the other side. The sound it made drowned out Leone’s voice.

“Ah! Th-That’s it!” A flash of inspiration suddenly struck Leone. A breakthrough in their tactics against Windsel—but first, she needed to save Liselotte. The horse’s tail had tangled around her leg, pulling her down and violently slamming her against the ground.

“Huh?!” Leone, wanting to help, rushed toward Liselotte—but as if to take the wind out of her sails, the horse twisted and flicked its tail, sending Liselotte toward her.

“Aaaah!”

“Liselotte! Oomph!” Leone firmly caught Liselotte as she was tossed away. Her body ached from the impact, but that didn’t matter.

“Are you okay?!”

“Leone! I’m sorry...”

“No, it’s okay! Now we’re even!”

As they spoke, Windsel was on to his next move. “Haaah!” With lightning swirling around the tip of the lance in his right hand, he plunged it into the ground. The lightning spread out from the lance instantly, in a circular pattern. Leone and Liselotte, on the ground, were struck with it.

“Aaaaggghhh!”

Pain ran through their whole bodies. Even as they tried to pull themselves away, the convulsions made it impossible.

Windsel also plunged the lance in his left hand into the ground. From there sprang forth a circle of flame.

“Eeek!” They found themselves sent flying by the blast of heat.

“Ngh! We still have a chance!”

“What is it, Leone?!”

Leone and Liselotte managed to struggle to their feet, supporting their weight on their weapons. They couldn’t tell whether it was from being struck by lightning or enveloped in flame, but their heads were swimming. But they hadn’t lost yet! It wasn’t over yet!

It was then that they noticed Windsel and his steed seem to suddenly grow in size. But he hadn’t grown at all. What he had done was gotten closer.

Slam!

The impact of the horse’s charge sent Leone and Liselotte flying even farther. It was so intense that Leone’s greatsword fell from her hands. Fortunately, it rolled and rattled its way back in front of her. “Ah! The dimension’s fading! I need to hurry!”

Forcing herself to her knees, Leone somehow managed to grip the greatsword’s hilt. Somehow, she managed to keep the Gift of the dimension going, but she panicked once she looked to the side.

“L-Liselotte...! Are you okay?!” Staggering to her feet, Leone cried out to Liselotte, who was lying on the ground beside her. But there was no response.

Liselotte lay on the ground, having lost consciousness from the impact.

“Liselotte! Liselotte! Wake up!” A silver point flicked in front of Leone’s eyes as she called out. It was the tip of one of Windsel’s lances. “Ah!”

“It’s over. Give up,” Windsel said, his voice level and quiet. “You don’t have to blame yourself. You fought well. Without so many Artifacts, it may have been me who found myself on the back foot. I’m grateful for them, even if they did come from that scum of a woman.”

Leone didn’t know what to do or say.

“Now, lay down your Artifact. What created this place was your Gift, right? Release it for me.”

She said nothing. Her gaze flitted over to Liselotte, who was still on the ground. If she woke up, she’d have a chance to attack Windsel from the side.

“Ah, you’re waiting for your friend to regain consciousness. Unfortunately for you, I don’t have time to spare!” Windsel put all his strength into his lance. Its surface sparked with lightning from its Gift. “This is the last time I’ll ask. Give up. Surrender.”

Leone’s lips were drawn into a straight line as she remained silent. She would wait until the very last moment for Liselotte. She would believe in her.

“Quite the stubborn one, aren’t you? I suppose I have no choice.”

Just as Windsel sighed, Leone saw someone crashing toward him from the side. “Huh...?!”

It wasn’t Liselotte; she was still unconscious. Whoever it was, they were far faster than an ordinary person. They were wearing a hood that obscured their face, but they weren’t dressed like Lewin or the other knights; they must have been one of the civilian refugees who’d joined in the operation.

“Who are you?!” Windsel, noticing, turned his focus.

At the same time, the person leaped up, and their hood fell back, revealing their face.

“Leon?!” his sister yelled.

But I thought he went back to Karelia with Inglis and Rafinha! When did he—?!

He’d infiltrated before, hiding among the refugees, and he must have done so again to join the operation. Leone and the others had been so focused on their own tasks that they hadn’t noticed.

“Sorry! Even someone like me can’t stand back and let their little sister be beaten!”

“A special-class Rune?!” Windsel gasped. “No!”

Leon’s gauntlet Artifact struck forth, and Windsel’s lance Artifact moved to intercept. It seemed like their weapons would collide—but they didn’t. Windsel’s lance pierced through Leon’s gauntlet easily. “What?!”

Leon grinned—then shone brightly and exploded.

“Whoa?!” Caught up in the brilliant blast, Windsel was unhorsed. He had been caught completely off guard. “Gah... Was that a trap?!” He rose, obviously frustrated.

“That was...” Leone began. *That was an explosion like the lightning beasts produced by Leon’s gauntlets, but this time Leon exploded!*

It had taken her by surprise, leaving her thinking for a second that Leon had left the fight as quickly as he’d entered.

“It’s a mimic, I guess you call it. This Artifact set doesn’t make lightning beasts, it makes lightning mimics. I guess that’s new gear for you. Gotta do something new and flashy. I’m not the one who made it, so...” Leon walked over to Leone to stand next to her. The gauntlets he’d previously used had been destroyed in the battle with the larval Prismar that Ripple had summoned. The Artifact he had now was a replacement, made for him by the Steelblood Front.

“Brother! What are you doing here?!”

Leon’s response was to awkwardly scratch the back of his head before giving a noncommittal grunt. “Rafinha kinda beat some sense into me. But I still couldn’t bear to face you, so I snuck in instead. And I couldn’t just stand by during that, so... Sorry, but I had to step in.”

“I apologize for not being strong enough.”

“C’mon, don’t worry about that. The guy’s right about one thing—you did fight well. You’ve gotten stronger. As your brother, I’m glad to see it, even if it didn’t turn out so well this time.”

“Brother!”

Leone leaned in for a hug, only for Leon to brush her off in a fluster.

“Whoa! Better not touch!”

That was when she realized. *This one’s a mimic too?*

“Anyway,” Leon continued, “get your friend up. Don’t want to leave her dreaming too long.”

“O-Okay! Got it!” Leone rushed to Liselotte’s side, wrapped her arms around her, and lifted her up. “Liselotte! Liselotte! Are you all right?! Get up!”

“Mmm... Huh?! The fight?! My apologies, I—!” Liselotte sprang to her feet and surveyed the surroundings. “Er...?! Leon! And so many of him!”

She rubbed her eyes and checked again, but she wasn’t mistaken. While Leon and Leone had talked, about a dozen Leons had surrounded Windsel.

“That’s the Gift of his new Artifact!” Leone explained, unable to hide her excitement. “He snuck in by disguising himself as one of the refugees!”

Liselotte chuckled. “You seem pleased, Leone.”

“Do I?”

“There isn’t anything wrong with that. You don’t have to be so stubborn anymore.”

“What do you mean, stubborn?!”

“He saved us, didn’t he? Any help is something to appreciate. Though I’m afraid we also need to reflect on our own failures.”

“Yes, you’re right.” Leone nodded.

Windsel, surrounded by the many Leon mimics, managed to clap his greaves together and remount. “Ah, I see a power like Karelia is quite fertile in talent. So the plan was to wear me down with skilled upper-class knights, and then the holy knight with a special-class Rune would be waiting in the wings.”

“Hate to say it, but I’m no holy knight of Karelia. Former holy knight, sure, but I’m with the Steelblood Front. I don’t have ties to Karelia anymore.”

“The Steelblood Front? Ah, the anti-Highland guerrillas. But why would they involve themselves in this war?”

“Well, it’s also nothing to do with our collective stance. This is personal. A big brother backs his little sister up in fights. That’s all.”

“An overprotective brother, then. I think your sister can handle herself quite well.”

“Well, thanks,” Leon said with an air of sarcasm. “Anyway, I kinda caused some trouble for her in the past... And even if this doesn’t take that back, I can at least look good in front of her!” The many Leons began to swirl around Windsel. Even Leone and Liselotte didn’t know which one was the real one.

“You can try, at least!” Windsel probably had trouble telling them apart as well. Bringing the bases of his lances together, he formed them into one double lance. And each shaft began to lengthen, like Leone’s greatsword could, though they hadn’t broadened. Only Windsel himself knew whether they could do that... “There!”

The twin lance spun at high speed. The lightning and flame cast from each intertwined into a tornado, sweeping over the area around Windsel.

Leone gasped. “L-Look at that!”

“Drawing close to that would spell disaster!” Liselotte said.

If the Leon mimics moved in, they’d self-destruct, catching Windsel in a blast he couldn’t avoid. That was why Windsel had chosen a precise yet wide-area attack that would catch them without letting them approach. He refused to play along with the game of determining which was real and which was fake.

“Nice! That’s pretty flashy!” The Leons still moved forward swiftly. As they did, several were caught by Windsel’s attack and exploded, but each time, a new Leon took its place. At times, some

closed almost to melee range, but the steed which gave Windsel the height advantage simply leaped away.

It was a hard-fought battle. The thunder of Windsel's flaming, shocking lances. The thunder of the exploding-mimic Leons struck by them. Their continuous overlap was as spectacular a noise as it was a sight. Neither could manage to strike a decisive blow, and the struggle between their Gifts continued. It would go on, perhaps, until one was so exhausted that they could no longer maintain their powers.

"At this rate, we won't be able to raise a hand against him!" Liselotte said, but the fight was so intense that Leone could barely hear Liselotte speak from next to her.

Leone was stuck in place for a moment, but then she let out a soft gasp, realizing something. The opening she'd thought of before Leon had arrived—that probably still existed. She moved toward what could make it happen.

"Leone?! What are you doing?!"

"We can't raise a hand—but we can raise our voice! Pullum!" Leone called out to Pullum, who was in the front lines of those watching that battle.

"Y-Yes! What is it?!"

"Lend us your power! Use your Gift to enhance Leon's Artifact! If you do..."

Liselotte, though, objected to Leone's idea. "Wait, Leone! Doesn't the music of Pullum's harp enhance all Artifacts? That will just strengthen Windsel's as well! And if anything, he has more!"

"Yes... If he can hear it! But look! Their attacks are so loud that the harp's music won't reach! So it will only help Leon!" Leone pointed to Windsel, enveloped in a storm of flame and lightning.

Liselotte nodded in agreement. "Perhaps! You may be right!"

"I hope so! C'mon, Pullum!"

"But Leone, which one is really your brother?" Pullum asked.

"Ugh... Maybe if I call out to him!"

"Nah, you don't need to," Pullum answered with a smile—in Leon's voice.

"Wh—?!"

As Leone and Liselotte watched in surprise, Pullum transformed into Leon. "Best part of this new Artifact's that I can disguise myself too. Comes in handy with the company I keep! Did you hear that, Pullum? We're counting on you!"

At Leon's call, the real Pullum stepped forward. "Yes, I heard! Here I go!" The beautiful melody of her harp filled the air, and Leon's Artifact glowed brighter.

"Hmm... This sure is a boost! Okay, how about this?!" Leon let loose a battle cry and created another wave of mimic Leons.

Altogether, there must have been dozens. “Seems like the tyranny of the majority is the answer here! Everyone, go for it!”

“All right!” The many Leon mimics cheered as they rushed toward Windsel.

Windsel had been able to keep up—until now. Suddenly, there was a mass of mimics surrounding him. Even as he moved to avoid them, the sheer number meant one was always close. Gradually, he had a harder and harder time responding.

And one finally closed in.

“All right! Follow me!” that mimic yelled with a smile. It immediately exploded.

Once Windsel’s defenses had been pierced, there was no way to stop the follow-up. Before he could get away to a safe distance, the other Leons swarmed in.

“Agh! Unhand me!” Windsel grunted.

As if to drown out his voice, the Leons piled on top of each other. Windsel was buried under a mountain of men, and with a tremendous flash of light and a thunderous sound, they exploded.

Kaboom!

“Man, I get a chill watching myself blow up...but isn’t this new Artifact something?” Leon quietly murmured.

“Brother! Windsel, my brother! Are you okay?!” Lahti called out and rushed forward.

“Prince Windsel!” Pullum cried as they waited for the smoke to clear.

“No, Lahti! He’s still—!”

“Pullum! That may be dangerous!” Liselotte’s voice overlapped with Leone’s.

Fortunately, their worry was unfounded, as Windsel had collapsed, with smoke coming from all over his body. “Ugh... You got me. I can’t believe you still had a trick up your sleeve!” Windsel had been so focused on his own attack that he hadn’t noticed the details of their plan.

“We never hid what we were doing. We just worked together... Thanks.” Leon smiled at Leone, Liselotte, and Pullum.

“Gah! I am not...defeated yet!” Windsel shuddered as he tried to push himself to his feet with his lance. It was astounding he could still struggle to his feet in his state.

“Stop this, Windsel! If this goes any further, you’ll die! Surrender like a man!” Lahti pleaded.

“Silence! Even now you’re a weakling who’s done nothing for yourself! I could kill you in a single breath, even in this state! Don’t

take my restraint as an excuse for baseless boasting!”

“Like hell you could!”

“What?!”

“You can barely stand right now! But if you think you really can, give it a try. And if you can’t, surrender!” Lahti challenged Windsel.

Leone could only hear it as recklessness. “Wait, Lahti! That’s going too far!”

“Indeed!” Liselotte chimed in. “You can’t issue such a challenge so casually!”

“Lahti! Leone and Liselotte fought so hard for you! You can’t just throw that away!” Pullum said.

The three were in agreement, but Leon shrugged his shoulders at their comments.

“Eh, nothing wrong with that. They might be stepbrothers, but they’re still brothers, and sometimes that means doing their talking with their fists.”

“Leon!” Leone protested. “Don’t be so blasé about it! We can’t let anything happen to Lahti! Not after all we’ve been through!”

“Calm down, Leone. He knows. That’s why he said what he did. Don’t you think he has his reasons?” Leon softly chided.

Lahti looked over at her and then to Leon and nodded. Leon returned the gesture.

“See? C’mon, believe in your friend,” he said to his sister.

His smile, mischievous as it was, brought a strange sense of security and trust to Leone. It always had. She no longer had reason to doubt it. She could finally reply to him with her full trust in him. “I understand. If you say so...”

“If you have Leone’s trust, then you have mine as well,” Liselotte said.

“Yes! Agreed!” Pullum also took a wait-and-see approach.

“Then, come, Lahti!” Windsel boomed. “I won’t hold back any longer! Your blood will be on your own hands!”

“The same goes for you!” Lahti barked back. There was no one left to stop them. Shouting, Lahti charged straight toward Windsel. It really was just an ordinary charge, surprising in its ordinariness. Even Leone could have easily handled it. There was no way Windsel couldn’t realize that.

“You’ll need to attack me with more heart than that!” As Windsel had said, he was no longer holding back. His lance thrust toward Lahti, crackling with lightning.

“Ah—!” Lahti’s head dipped, and he brought his arms before himself as protection, but he maintained his charge, using his arms as a shield. He intended to smash straight into Windsel. Leone couldn’t imagine how he could endure it. The lightning caught Lahti’s arms,

and his sleeves were torn away from inside out.

“Wh—?!” Leone gasped.

Yes, the sleeves were torn, but not from the lightning. The nature of the incongruity immediately became clear. His arms had transformed, becoming far stouter, far longer. They were no longer human, in shape or color. Their blue scales were as clear and beautiful as a mirror. Lahti grew a tail, and his whole body began to swell.

“Groooooowr!”

His shout became a roar!

“Wh—?!”

“A dragon?!”

“He’s just like the ancient dragon!”

In terms of size, compared to Fufailbane, he was like a child next to an adult, if not an infant next to an adult, but he was still many times larger than a normal human—around the size of a medium magicite beast. His mighty scales repelled the lightning of Windsel’s lance, and the mass of his body bowled into Windsel.

“Agh!” Caught by surprise, and unable to stand up to such a weighty blow, Windsel was sent flying.

“Gwahhhhh!” Lahti’s shout mixed with a dragon’s roar. The dragon gave chase, leaping into the air and smashing down on Windsel.

Craaash!

“Heh heh heh... How about that, Windsel?! Give up yet?!” Lahti’s dragon maw twisted into a grin as he brought Windsel down. But Windsel didn’t respond. “Hmm? Wait, are you okay?!” Lahti hurriedly moved away, and brought his draconic snout down toward Windsel to check on him.

Leon approached. “He’ll be fine. He’s knocked out, but he’s a tough guy. Hey, someone, get me a rope! Gotta make sure he can’t cause any trouble when he wakes up! Get those Artifacts off him too!” he called to Lewin and his knights, who moved in unison.

“Lahti?! What happened to you?! Are you okay?!” Pullum worriedly rushed to Lahti’s side, and Leone turned her attention there as well.

“Was... Was that the effect of dragon lore?!”

“We received its blessings as well, but to actually become a dragon...” Liselotte began.

“Inglis said I was probably the one most suited to dragon lore, and that I’d definitely have something awaken...so I’ve been practicing.”

It was amazing how even having eaten just a little of the dragon's meat, he had still become able to understand Draconic. Inglis had said that having shown his aptitude for dragon lore, he would probably show changes like she had, or like those seen in Leone and Liselotte's Artifacts. It could be his last line of defense. She had also added that he should try to eat more of the remaining dragon meat.

Inglis had said all of this to him before leaving, and she had been right. He was amazed at how accurate her predictions had been. Amazed *and* grateful.

"And...I had Leon as my spotter during my late-night practice," Lahti admitted hesitantly.

"My brother?! You mean you knew he was here?!" Leone gasped.

"So the dragon roars I've been hearing at night were you practicing..." Liselotte pondered.

"Well, he noticed me when I came back... So we struck a deal, I'd spot for him and he'd let me in," Leon admitted.

"Sorry for keeping secrets, but even Lewin said that you can't fool your enemies if you can't fool your friends."

"No, it's fine," Leone said, smiling at Lahti. "We made it through all right."

"All's well that ends well," Liselotte intoned.

Lewin strode over. "Prince Lahti! We've restrained Prince Windsel. Let's announce his capture to the remaining enemy forces and demand their surrender!"

"Yeah..." Lahti said.

"Once that's over, what do we do with him?" Leon asked Lahti and Lewin.

The obvious first priority was to use him to secure a surrender...but what would become of Windsel after? Leone was curious as well. They'd fought, but he hadn't seemed like a terrible person.

"There's no need for restraints. Once that's over, execute me," came the calm voice of Windsel, still bound, as he opened his eyes.

"That's absurd!" Lahti responded. "I would never!"

"What's so absurd about it?" Windsel asked. "If you're to be king, I'm a rebel who bared his fangs at the crown. That can't be ignored. It would set a poor example."

"But... But—!"

"I was mistaken about you, I'll admit that. But for that reason...I will not drag you down any further."

"Prince Lahti, what Prince Windsel says has its merits," Lewin advised. "At the very least, we cannot allow him to remain in this land. He himself has demanded as much."

"But he has a special-class Rune!" Lahti protested. "We can't kill

or exile someone like that!"

"Were he a simple rebel, it would perhaps be fine to turn him to your own ends. But this is bad blood amongst royalty. It cannot be solved so simply."

"And I have no interest in fighting for anywhere but Alcard," Windsel agreed. "Give the order. Have me cut down. It will only reinforce your legitimacy as the new king—a king who defeated, then killed, even one with a special-class Rune."

"I told you, I don't want to!" Lahti said.

"Then, perhaps order me to commit suicide? I don't mind, but it seems a bit cold."

"I'm not trying to be cold! I'm trying to tell you that I don't want to lose you! Hey, Lewin! Isn't there some other option?! Didn't Inglis say what to do after we won?!"

"No, as I said before, she simply said that we must settle things."

"Ugh...! How do I handle this...?"

This was not a matter for Leone or Liselotte to interfere in. Frustrated, their teeth gritted, they could only watch as it unfolded. Leone stared at the ground, and then she felt Leon pat her shoulder before he crouched down next to Windsel.

"Hey. I get the impression that you don't much like Highlanders."

"Of course I don't! Tiffanyer and those who sold their souls to her for a stigmata deserve nothing but slow deaths!"

"Yeah, that's the stuff! Feel like making it happen? Come with me, and it just might."

"You said you were with the Steelblood Front. Are you trying to recruit me? Telling me to join you by reducing myself to nothing but a guerrilla fighter?"

"C'mon, it ain't that bad. You may want to fight for Alcard, but Alcard doesn't have a place for you anymore. We do. We fight not for a specific country but for all. And Alcard's included in that."

"Big words. Are you going to talk about 'for all mankind' next?"

"Maybe the big guy would. He dresses a bit creepy, but he's the real deal."

"And how about you?"

"I guess I'm the kind of guy who thinks something needs to be changed from how the Highlanders squeeze us tighter and tighter. Somebody's gotta do it, and it became my calling."

"My goals aren't quite so lofty. I hate scum like that."

"That's fine. Everyone has their own reasons. Everyone ends up somewhere where they can fight for what they believe in. We can drive out those who have ravaged Alcard, so why don't you join us and think about your next step after we crush them? That way would save your brother a lot of grief. You'd be able to help him out from a

distance. It's not good for siblings to make each other sad. Although, I don't really have room to talk."

"My brother..." Windsel looked over at Lahti.

"Brother! That's great! Go for it! Stop talking about how you need to die for the country to move on! Please, live!"

Windsel paused at Lahti's words. "Very well. I suppose that's not so bad."

"Brother! Thank you, Leon!"

"That's wonderful!" Pullum added. "Thank you so much!" They both looked like a heavy weight had been lifted from their shoulders.

Leon chuckled. "Eh. That's another arrow in our quiver, and a sharp one at that. Gives me an excuse for what I've been up to."

It was a very Leon-like statement, and Leone couldn't help but smile.

"Then, Prince Lahti," Lewin said. "Let's call for their surrender."

"Yeah, that's right! Leone, can you take us back?"

"Understood." Leone released the Gift that had created the dimension, and they returned to where they had begun. The blowing snow, the dragon's tails disguised as magicite beasts, and the mounds of snow and ice concealing them were back. Having been shielded from the icy wind inside that dimension, the sudden return had everyone shivering.

"Followers of His Royal Highness Prince Windsel! Listen well!" Lewin announced from their forefront.

"The war is over!" Lahti continued from his side. "There's no need to keep fighting!"

"What?!" the response came.

"Those weren't magicite beasts?!"

"Prince Windsel is with them!" The enemy soldiers were bewildered.

"Everyone, hear their words and heed them! Understood?" Windsel spoke to his knights.

"Yes, Your Royal Highness!"

It seemed like the aftermath was going to go well. In this more relaxed atmosphere, Leone approached her brother. "Thank you."

But even though her words were grateful, Leon turned to her, his hands pressed together, and bowed deeply. "I'm sorry, Leone!"

"Huh? Why?"

"It's not good for siblings to make each other sad! I just said that, but I really had no right to. Especially not in front of you. I'm sorry!"

"Then... How about, from now on, you make me smile instead? That would be enough. It's true, you leaving for the Steelblood Front caused me a lot of trouble. But now, you've saved my friends from sorrow... That just about makes things even." Leone smiled softly at

Leon.

“Leone...”

“Inglis told me all about what was going on, about holy knights and hial menaces... So, I want you to follow the path you believe in. In the meantime, I’ll follow mine. It’ll be fine. My friends are here for me.”

In response, Leon hugged her tightly. “You really are a good kid. A little sister like you is wasted on me.”

How many years had it been since she’d felt the warmth of family, the warmth of her brother? She wasn’t sad, but her vision still became cloudy. She looked over to Liselotte, who had tears of her own in her eyes.

Chapter III: Inglis, Age 15—Battle with the Prismer (1)

Near the fortifications on the eastern side of Ahlemin, as the swarm of magicite beats which served as the Prismer's advance guard approached, a faint rainbow-colored haze set over the area. As soon as humans came in contact with it, they transformed into magicite beasts. Chaos overtook the ranks of those soldiers who were present to intercept the Prismer.

The same was true for Principal Miriela's strike force, composed of handpicked knights' academy students. From aboard the Flygear Port, Miriela watched Morris, a second-year student, suddenly become a magicite beast.

Silva panicked. "Even Morris?! That's absurd! Principal Miriela, what was that prism powder he was talking about?!"

"I've heard it's a compound carried by Steelblood Front members," she answered. "Supposedly, if given to animals it can turn them into magicite beasts, and in large enough doses, it even works on Highlanders!"

"Ah! Does that mean Morris is with the Steelblood Front?!"

"Yes. Thinking back on it, they had an even better grasp on movements in the palace than we did—it was like they had informants lurking. They were even able to turn Leon, a holy knight, so I shouldn't be surprised that some in the academy leaned toward them! But right now, we have to focus on what's in front of us! I don't think it was just prism powder that caused his transformation!"

Even she had never heard of a human turning into a magicite beast. Morris had said that the prism powder burned, and then he had transformed. Surely something else was going on too; the prism powder must have reacted with something—probably the rainbow haze.

It was something that occurred near Prismers, turning living things into magicite beasts, generating an army for the Prismer. As it moved, it engulfed the surrounding ecosystem, creating many magicite beasts and causing great harm. Was the combination of the haze with the prism powder what caused the transformation of people into magicite beasts?

No, if that was true, why would it only be happening now? She had heard that the Steelblood Front was fighting even now to protect

the nearby villages and towns from the many magicite beasts the Prismer had created. The situation was so dire that the local authorities were tacitly accepting the Steelbloods' presence; in practice, they had almost formed a united front. Realistically, it was thanks to their efforts that a stronghold could be established at Ahlemin.

Logically...that meant their own troops, carrying prism powder, must surely have approached the Prismer to some degree. They must have stepped into its haze. If it were just a reaction between that and the prism powder, there would have been cases of humans becoming magicite beasts earlier, but Miriela had heard of no such thing happening before.

The Prismer had traveled a considerable distance to here from where it had revived on the Karelia-Venefic border. At the very least, the Steelblood Front would have been quick to inform their own. It was information that could spell the difference between life and death. Yet Morris still carried the prism powder.

Therefore, there had to be some other factor, something that caused the reaction here but not during the Prismer's advance. Miriela wasn't sure what, but she knew it was something she had to follow up on. If it was a simple condition—if it was easy to set up a situation in which large numbers of people could be transformed into magicite beasts—that was something that could spell the end for the surface.

While these thoughts flew through her mind, she watched the chaos unfold below. A knight, transformed into a magicite beast, attacked the knights around him.

“Grahhhhhhhh!”

The arms of the beast, grown thicker and more powerful, swatted away several knights.

“Aaagh!”

“Ugh...! Get a hold of yourself! We're on the same side! Can't you hear me?!”

“Has even his mind become that of a beast?!”

The surrounding knights had not expected one of their own to transform into a magicite beast. Reluctant as they were to immediately strike him down, its rampage continued.

“Gwaaaaaaah!”

Morris, now a magicite beast, was the same. He tried to kick Yua away with one of his now-treelike legs.

Unlike the other knights, though, Yua was *Yua*, and she easily

seized the leg, stopping it in midair with a clap of her hands. "What's this, Beanpole? A new trick?" Tilting her head quizzically, she lifted Morris by his leg.

Left helpless, he writhed in anger.

"Whoa, cool down." With a troubled expression, Yua held on to Morris tightly by the leg and leaped to the roof of a nearby building. He was dragged along upside down.

"Gwaaah! Graaah!"

"C'mon, Beanpole. The principal isn't laughing, and neither is Four-Eyes. They're gonna get mad if you don't knock it off. And then who's gonna cover for me?" Yua shook Morris, but it did nothing.

While Yua tried to get some sense into Morris, the knight-corporal issued commands to the force.

"Ugh! There's no choice! We have to attack him! We won't be able to respond to the oncoming enemy like this!"

"But he's our friend!" several of his knights protested in unison.

"That's right! He's a good guy! You know that, right?!"

"But we have no choice!" the officer protested. "If we don't, you'll all die! I can't let that happen! Follow me!" Drawing his Artifact sword, with a blade swirling with lightning he slashed at the magicite beast which had sprung up in his unit.

"Ngh! Understood!"

"I'm sorry! Forgive me!" The other knights followed suit, spurred on by their leader's actions when his words had not been enough.

"Graaaaaaaaaah!"

They charged in, only to be knocked over by a body check from the magicite beast, and they all gave startled screams. "Aaaaah!"

"Ugh...! He's strong!"

"Stronger than a normal magicite beast!"

"Graaah!"

The beast extended its claws toward the fallen knight-corporal, trying to impale him.

"Ugh?!" But just before those claws pierced his chest, a flash of light descended from the heavens.

Slaaash!

It cut down through the magicite beast that was once a knight, cleaving him in half.

"Whaaat?!" As the knights gaped in awe at the speed of the feat,

Eris appeared next to the fallen beast.

“Wow! Lady Eris!”

“A hial menace has come to our rescue!”

Eris called out to those around her, calm but firm. “I’ll handle things here! Stay in formation, and prepare for the oncoming enemies!”

“Yes, ma’am!” The confusion among the knights disappeared. If a hial menace had said so, it had to be the right thing to do. Eris’s words had the power to inspire the knights, to unite their will. This was the result of trust and respect built up over the years.

Eris called up to Miriela in the Flygear Port. “Miriela! Do you have any idea whether the transformations are going to keep spreading among our forces?! If they are, we need to pull out!”

“You haven’t seen this before either?!”

“Of course not! Normal people turning into magicite beasts?! If this were something that happened often, the whole world would probably already be destroyed! So, what do you think?”

“I can’t say for sure without a closer examination, but I don’t believe it will spread to the entire army. It’s likely that those transformed into magicite beasts were Steelblood Front operatives carrying prism powder! That it’s causing some kind of reaction when brought close to the Prismer!”

“Prism powder?! I see. I suspect there’s something else we’ve missed, but...” Eris was grappling with the same reservations Miriela was. However, they were both fairly sure that the presence of the prism powder was a key factor. “All of this with the prism powder is quite ironic. It’s like the Prismer is doing us the favor of identifying their spies!”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Anyway, understood! Be ready to intercept the Prismer! I’ll hunt the magicite beasts!” Eris charged toward another magicite beast which had appeared near her.

“Gyaaah!”

The beast swung its fist to meet her, only to find its arm sliced off and shredded by Eris’s right-hand sword. The beast continued on, passing her by with its full momentum—only to be sliced through at the waist by her left-hand sword.

“Wow! That was incredible!” one of the knights said.

“So impressive!” another exclaimed.

“There’s still one more!” Eris leaped toward a nearby wall, then off that wall high into the air. Her momentum sent her like an arrow toward Morris, whom Yua was still dangling from the roof. “Haaah!”

A high-speed slash flashed in the darkness.

But Morris softly floated upward, avoiding Eris's strike. Yua had lifted him and saved him.

"Ah! You're that girl from the academy!"

"Stop. Don't. This is Morris," Yua said, stubborn.

"I understand how you feel, but there's no way to turn him back! If we let him be, he'll kill you and your friends! Leave this to me. Spare yourself the pain. You can close your eyes and plug your ears."

"No way. This is Beanpole. He's my only friend."

"We have no choice! There's no other way. Please understand that."

"I said *no*! If you're gonna fight him...you'll have to go through me first." Yua, normally so zoned out, was firmly insistent for once.

"Yua! But he's—!" Silva choked on his own words. He understood how she felt. Morris was no stranger to him.

Silva considered the younger student a good go-between when dealing with Yua, a girl he neither understood nor felt secure in his authority around, and Morris was a good influence on her. Even if he was with the Steelbloods, Silva could think of plenty of reasons to save him—if it was possible.

But Silva also understood what Eris was saying. There was no way to turn a magicite beast back into what it once had been. And with an army of those creatures closing in on Ahlemin, followed closely by the Prismers, to allow their own forces to collapse from the inside out, thrown into chaos by the beasts springing up, would be a disaster.

Just like Morris, many of the monsters in the oncoming horde were humanoid. Everyone could tell that they were probably humans who had been transformed in the same way. If they were reluctant to fight against those who sprang up among their own forces, they wouldn't be able to fight the oncoming enemy. And that could lead to their being wiped out.

To avoid that, they needed to shake off their doubts and unite in purpose as soon as possible. Eris was trying to show them the way. Moreover, she wasn't asking the close compatriots of the afflicted to take action—she was handling it herself. She was willing to take the initiative, even if it would lead to her being resented.

As the bearer of a special-class Rune, whose fate would one day be to fight alongside a hial menace, Silva felt that he should take the initiative of siding with Eris.

Yet, at the same time, he also wanted to take Yua's side. Maybe handling the others who had transformed but letting Morris live would be fine. Maybe he could let Yua have her way...

Wait, Silva thought, do I only feel that way because of how well I know Morris too?

It was a puzzle. But he had to make a decision.

“Silva.” Principal Miriela called his name, and made a restraining motion with her hand. Her expression said that she would be the one to speak, and he didn’t need to go any further.

He was relieved, but frustration lay under that. In the end, he was still just an academy student, under Principal Miriela’s protection. He felt powerless.

But before even the principal could speak, Eris sprung into action. “I’m sorry! Blame me for this if you have to!” Eris’s swords flashed forth from where she had landed. There was nothing in range, and she should have struck only air, but around her hands, space itself distorted.

“Ah!” Only the golden blades appeared next to Morris. Caught by surprise, Yua was too slow to react. The blades swept toward Morris—only to be stopped just short by another.

Clang!

The tip of a golden spear. Sparks flew as it stopped the swords. Just like Eris’s blades, space had distorted and it had appeared from nowhere.

“What?! But that’s—!” Eris gasped.

“I’m going to have to stop you. I can’t abandon my comrade.” The voice came from somewhere else—a different building than the one from which Yua dangled Morris. There, a tall, beautiful woman with long red hair stood. It was her golden spear that had stopped Eris’s swords.

“A hial menace?! The Steelblood Front’s?!”

“Sistia. I have no interest in trouble with you right now, hial menace of Karelia.”

Eris cautiously watched Sistia, who leaped from her own rooftop to Yua’s. “Eris. I feel much the same.”

“Are you hurt?” Sistia smiled at Yua.

Despite her intensity, Sistia was really trying to make a good first impression here. Yua wasn’t used to being treated that way at all, so she responded with confusion.

“I’m fine... Thanks.”

“Then, right away, please seal him in ice! It will be okay. A magicite beast’s life force is strong enough to survive that for a time! We won’t be able to turn him back, but we can keep him alive in a state which allows us to coexist! But we need to stop him from thrashing about.”

“Freeze him? Um... If you say so, but it’ll be pretty tough...”

“I’ll do it! Yua! Make Morris face me!” Miriela offered.

“Principal Miriela! Here!” Yua turned Morris toward her.

“Ice, come forth!” Principal Miriela brandished her staff. From its tip, countless blocks of ice flew toward Morris. Striking parts of his body in rapid succession, they froze his body on impact. In no time at all, he was frozen completely.

“Hey, thanks.”

“No, you don’t have to thank me. Unfortunately, this is all I can do to help here...”

Eris sheathed her swords but challenged Sistia all the same. “And now what do you intend to do? If there’s a way for hial menaces to save magicite beasts, I’d love to see it.”

“Sorry, but I can’t. It’s not something *I* can do.” From the rooftop, Sistia looked further up into the night sky, toward a large black Flygear floating in the darkness. It had slipped in directly between the knights on the ground and the Paladins in the sky.

“That’s...!” Eris gasped.

Aboard it, a man all in black with a mask concealing his face stood. Eris had never seen him before, but she had heard of his striking appearance. This was the black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front.

“O noble warriors who would challenge the Prismer, I beg your pardon for my interruption. O my comrades! Cast away your prism powder at once! It mingles with the aura of the Prismer, and turns people to magicite beasts! Those who do not carry prism powder have not transformed! Now, hurry!” His raised voice echoed. It seemed too loud for that of one man. It was loud enough to reach across even a battlefield containing a large army.

Eris couldn’t sense the movement of mana from around him, but she wondered whether there might be some special power he possessed.

“But why mention that only now? If he had said so earlier, there would have been less harm, less confusion...” she observed, seemingly not realizing she spoke aloud.

“Yes, that’s right. The Prismer’s come quite a long way. He should have realized during that time.” Miriela nodded, having come to the same conclusion.

“We had no way of knowing. If we had realized earlier, we would have warned our comrades... Announcing it now is as much as announcing our presence,” Sistia sullenly insisted. “But these transformations suddenly began to occur as the Prismer approached Ahlemin. This situation is the result of our haste to warn people of the danger and save as many as possible. We cannot be blamed.”

“Suddenly, as it drew closer to Ahlemin?” Eris asked. “Then I suppose you didn’t have a choice... I’m sorry.”

“As long as you understand, it’s fine. We regret having held you back in your battle against the Prismer.”

“But why would such a thing happen as it drew close to Ahlemin?” Silva asked. “Is this land cursed? It is where the Prismer was originally kept...”

“Or perhaps it’s that the Prismer’s power increases even as we speak, and it reached a point where it would react with the prism powder and cause even humans to transform,” Miriela replied.

“In any case, nothing about this is good,” Eris said, and no one could object.

“Um, how long are we leaving Beanpole like this? I’m scared he’ll go splat if I drop him.” The roof on which Morris was frozen was pitched, and Yua was supporting the block of ice so he wouldn’t fall.

“I’m sorry. Hold on a moment.” As Sistia reached out to help Yua, a voice came from above.

“Sistia, I’ve kept you waiting. Let us at least grant our poor comrades a peaceful rest by our own hands.” The Flygear came down to meet Sistia.

“Yes! But first, can we somehow save Morris? Like we did the consul in Nova.” Sistia bowed reverently to the black-masked man as she made her request.

“Whether that be salvation or no, I cannot say... But if that is your wish, I shall.”

“Thank you!”

The black-masked man nodded, and stepped from his Flygear to stand beside the ice encasing Morris. As his hand brushed over it, a pale-blue light rose like smoke from where he made contact. As the light welled up, Morris shrank within the ice.

“Ooh...?!” Yua’s eyes opened wide. The magicite beast Morris was small enough to ride on her hand or shoulder. “Ah! So it’s like that! This is like the one Inglis has!”

“Indeed. As I said before, this may not be salvation...but at least he cannot do much harm. I’m sorry, this is all that I can do.” As he spoke, he placed the tiny, frozen Morris in Yua’s hand.

Yua held Morris dearly. “No, really, thanks. Even if he doesn’t change back, I’ll take good care of him. He’s my friend...”

“I see... I entrust my comrade Morris to you, then.” The black-masked man bowed his head to Yua.

“Yua, I’ll help you find a way to turn Morris back,” Miriela said. “I think Theodore will lend a hand as well.”

“Ah, Principal Miriela... Yes, I’ll try to be a bit more serious from now on.”

“I wish you’d shown some work ethic earlier, but... Ah, well, it seems you’ve grown. Let’s do our best!”

His work there done, the black-masked man turned on his heel. "Then, let us be off, Sistia. There still remain other comrades who have become beasts. We must at least grant them peace."

"Yes...!"

"Leave the chaos in the town to us," he said to Miriela and her group. "Fight your way forward. We also live on the surface. There is no reason for us not to aid you in your fight against the Prismer."

With some hesitation, Eris responded, "I thank you."

Now all that was left was for each to take their place and prepare—but not Silva.

"Wait! Lady Eris! Principal Miriela! Since it worked for Morris, then shouldn't we do the same for as many people as we can? There are lives to be—maybe 'saved' isn't the right word, but still! Shouldn't we order our entire force to freeze the humans who have become magicite beasts?"

"Silva," Miriela began.

"Four-Eyes... Sometimes you have good ideas," Yua said.

"You could have done without that belittling qualifier!"

The black-masked man pondered Silva's idea. "Hm... The people who have become magicite beasts are all my comrades. It would be good to save their lives, so that they might find hope in the future. I understand this limits your tactics, and I would be deeply grateful were you to be so considerate. However..."

"Is there some problem with that?" Silva asked.

"I apologize, but even my power is not infinite. To transform so many would leave me without the strength to aid you in the battle with the Prismer itself, I fear. Is that still acceptable to you?"

Eris was at a loss for an answer, but Silva's words came quickly. "I don't mind! If we lack strength in our battle with the Prismer, it's my job to make up for it! This special-class Rune isn't just a decoration!"

"I'll do my best too, I guess," Yua agreed.

"Brave words. Our goal, from the beginning, was to act from the shadows for the sake of this country and its people. We do not intend to shatter Karelia or bring Karelians to despair. Our only enemies are Highlanders who would devour this earth. Then, I await your command, hial menace, princess of a dead kingdom."

"What?! How did you—just who *are* you?!"

"What?!" Miriela gasped. "Eris, you used to be a princess?!"

"That was a long time ago! And it's over now. It has nothing to do with the situation at hand."

"Agreed," the black-masked man said. "I apologize for digressing. We must now give our all to destroy the Prismer... How shall we proceed?"

"We don't necessarily have to *destroy* it," Eris responded. "If we

could chase it to some isolated area, that would be fine too.”

Even so, Eris worried over whether she should follow the black-masked man’s suggestion. She thought it would be good to save the people who were turned into magicite beasts, but then he would be too exhausted to fight the Prismer—they needed him in that fight.

That power that he just used to shrink a person transformed into a magicite beast—she had no idea what it was. She hadn’t sensed the flow of mana, but even just from what she could see with her eyes, it was obvious that some strong power was at work.

Power that not even I, a hial menace, understand, but power all the same... It might be the same as Inglis’s. If so, his strength is needed for the fight with the Prismer. That would lighten the burden on Rafael—raise the chances that he might survive. No matter how many of the transformed people he treats, it’s meaningless if we’re unable to stop the Prismer. Even more would suffer in exchange.

He said that the Steelblood Front, even if it did so from the shadows, fought for the sake of this country and its people. However, Eris judged that if they took too active a role in this battle, the people’s hearts would turn to them, ultimately destabilizing Karelia’s politics.

It may be true that he plots neither separatism nor armed revolt, but at this moment, should not all our focus should be on the battle with the Prismer? Borders mean nothing to magicite beasts. From that perspective, I cannot easily agree, at least not personally.

As Eris pondered all this, someone else’s voice cut in from a Flygear descending from overhead, having overheard their conversation.

“Understood. Tell all our forces to respond to the humanoid magicite beasts by freezing them in place.”

“Rafael! We can’t just—!” Eris began.

“Are you sure about this?” Ripple asked from the controls of the Flygear.

“Yes. Silva’s right. I’d like to save as many as we can. Unlike him, we can’t do anything for people who have been transformed like that. If he’s the only one who can, I’d like to ask him for his assistance,” Rafael answered without hesitation.

“Those magicite beasts are my comrades, members of the Steelblood Front... We bear no enmity toward your government, but your government marks us as traitors. Yet you would still save them, holy knight?”

“Against the terror of magicite beasts, loyalties or politics matter not. I will do my best to save as many as I can. That’s what I believe a holy knight’s duty is.”

“I salute you, then. I shall leave the battle with the Prismer to you

and do what only I can.”

“Yes. Leave it to me.” Rafael nodded to the black-masked man. “Eris, Ripple, I’m sorry to have decided that myself.”

“Command is yours; you have the right,” Eris answered. “I will follow your lead.”

“Yeah, exactly,” Ripple said. “If that’s your decision, I’m behind it.”

Even so, they had no intention of letting Rafael fight the Prismers and lose his life if they had anything to say about it. That was only the last resort. If they couldn’t defeat the Prismers with conventional tactics, they could lead it to an unpopulated area; that could buy time for Inglis to arrive. They would fight with their own strength, waiting on that hope.

They would not give up. Eris and Ripple nodded to each other.

“Then, let’s hurry and give the order for the new tactic!” Eris said.

“Yes!” Rafael agreed.

“Yeah, got it!” Ripple said.

As they were about to depart, the black-masked man stopped them. “Wait. If you wish to communicate your order, touch my shoulder and speak. Your voice will reach all your forces.”

“Oh, like I heard before... How in the world did you...?”

“It’s nothing much. Now, hurry.”

Rafael alighted from the Flygear next to the black-masked man and touched his shoulder. “This is Rafael Bilford! Can you hear me?!” Just like the man’s voice had before, his voice echoed across the town. “Use the power of ice Artifacts to stop the people who have been transformed into magicite beasts! There’s no need to harm them further! Separate measures will be taken to incapacitate them! Prioritize use of ice Artifacts! And take formations prioritizing the defense of those who wield them!”

At his call, shouts arose all over.

“Sir Rafael?! If those are the orders of the holy knight, then—!”

“We can save them! Let’s do it!”

“Understood, Sir Rafael!”

Everyone had been quiet in response to the black-masked man’s previous announcement, but at Rafael’s call they responded with cheers and excitement.

“Let’s go! Follow me!” As Rafael called out, he drew his crimson blade, Dragon Fang.

“Grooooooar!”

His determination was matched with a draconic roar from the Artifact. Clad in armor of the same color as the blade, he took to the

sky with its wings. The glow that followed him served as an urging to follow, inflaming the hearts of the knights on the battlefield below. They cheered as he soared overhead.

“Rafael! Let’s leave the protection of the rear to them!” Eris said.

“We’ll go to the front! Quick! The swarm is almost upon us!”

Ripple agreed.

“Yes! Let’s go!” Flying alongside Eris and Ripple’s Flygear, Rafael sallied forth from the Paladins’ position above the eastern wall.

Turning around for a moment, he saw that his forces were immediately responding to his orders, setting up formations with the wielders of ice Artifacts in the rear guard.

And we’ll buy them time as well! “Lady Eris! Lady Ripple! We will take the lead, and charge the enemy position!”

“Understood!” Eris responded. “That’s a good idea!”

“Then Eris and I will take the left!” Ripple said.

“And I’ll get the right!”

Their Flygear rapidly turned, disappearing. Accelerating at full speed, Rafael rapidly reached the right of the line. Roaring, he charged as fast as he could, plunging Dragon Fang’s crimson blade into a bird magicite beast.

“Cawwwwww!”

Shrieking, the beast writhed in pain, dropping the humanoid magicite beast it carried. That wasn’t a problem. Neither strikes nor shocks could harm a magicite beast; an Artifact was necessary to wound it. So even if it fell a long way, the humanoid should be fine.

The problem was the bird. It and its kin seemed to be the guardians of the Prismer, and previously, even a brush from the blade of Dragon Fang could practically boil them away. But now, not so much. Rather than disappearing, the beast held its shape and shrieked.

“I’m sure of it! This beast is stronger than the ones before!” If the Prismer’s guardians were tougher, then it could safely be assumed that the Prismer itself was as well. “But now!”

Slaaash!

The crimson blade cleaved sideways through the magicite beast, cutting it in two. Even if they no longer simply evaporated, cutting them wasn’t hard either. “I’ll cut through you if I must!”

Rafael held Dragon Fang horizontally out from his waist and charged into the midst of a line of enemies to his side. As he shouted, a slash of crimson light cut down the birdlike beasts. A large number of humanoid beasts fell, and the ice unleashed by the Paladins’ rear

guard buried them, creating ice statue after ice statue.

As Rafael continued his assault from the right of the line toward the center, he saw many humanoid beasts fall on the left as well.

“Eris, Ripple! I knew you two could do it!”

He wanted to maintain their onslaught. Increasing his speed, he pushed in from the right flank. Eris and Ripple approached from the opposite side, and the line of magicite beasts coalesced into a clump in the center.

As Rafael reached the center, the vanguard of the Paladins was already engaged heavily with the magicite beasts. Even though Rafael, Eris, and Ripple had split up, they were effectively pushing the beasts together. The bird beasts were stronger than the ones they’d fought near the border with Venefic, but the Paladins were still able to handle them. Rafael was proud of his subordinates. Their losses were few, while the ranks of the magicite beasts visibly thinned as he watched.

Finally, he met up with Eris and Ripple in the center.

“Rafael!” Eris called out. “You’re okay, right?”

“Yes. But, Lady Eris, Lady Ripple, let’s be careful. The beasts are stronger than the ones we fought previously!”

“Yeah,” Ripple said. “They seem sturdier than the ones from before! I guess this means the Prismers has gotten stronger too?”

“That’s exactly why we can’t let ourselves get worn down in the opening action! Anyway, we need to get through this while limiting our losses, and prepare for what comes next!” Eris said.

“Yes, that’s right!” Rafael looked back toward Ahlemin. The chaos caused when the humanoid magicite beasts sprang up seemed to have subsided. The ice-Artifact-armed squads atop the ramparts had begun to launch a supporting barrage at the humanoid beasts which had fallen.

Not only that, but a hazy, pale-blue light was appearing all over town—the same light they’d seen from the black-masked man when he’d shrunk the magicite beast. It seemed things were going well there as well. Rafael hoped he could make it to the beasts frozen outside town once he finished inside. It must have been a lot of work, but Rafael could only trust the Steelbloods’ leader would see to them all. “He’s doing his best too— Wait! What’s that?!” he gasped.

“Whoa! Look at that!” Ripple said.

“Ah! Ripple, Rafael! The next wave’s coming!” Eris called out.

Rafael was looking back, Eris toward the right flank, and Ripple straight ahead.

“What?!” they gasped at once. Each, looking in a different direction, spotted the enemy.

“What’s going on?!” Rafael asked.

"They're trying to surround us?!" Eris said.

"They're *everywhere*, no matter where I look!" Ripple said.

Ahlemin was a pocket amidst a vast force of magicite beasts, almost all of the bird type. There must have been nearly ten times more of them around than there had been earlier.

Most notably...

"I've never seen magicite beasts move like that!" Eris gasped.

"Yeah..." Ripple agreed. "I didn't know they could do that."

Eris and Ripple gave words to the thoughts running through Rafael's head. Magicite beasts, as powerful and as threatening to humanity on the surface as they were, behaved more akin to animals than anything. They were known to form hordes and attack villages and towns in their path. However, that was an instinctive behavior, not due to their own tactics.

Forcing their foes into a siege or a surrounded pocket before falling upon them was not a decision which could be expected of them. But now their actions seemed to be driven by clear objectives and plans. This was even more unsettling than their sheer numbers.

Rafael felt uneasy, but his anxiety did not serve a point here. When the enemy approached, his duty was to respond. "This is no time to panic! Prepare to counterattack!"

"You're right!" Eris said. "The longer we hesitate, the more of our own will fall!"

"But how do we counter them?" Ripple asked. "The Paladins can't handle that many!"

"If we stay out here, we'll be cut off!" Rafael responded. "We'll pull back within the walls! Once we're able to link up with the levies, we attack with the entire army!"

"But they have us surrounded on all sides!" Eris said. "If one sector is broken through, we could collapse from there!"

"Maybe we should split up and each take a direction, then!" Ripple suggested.

"Then, let's split the Paladins into four groupings and use each as the main force holding the line in a sector!" Rafael ordered.

"Three of those can each be led by one of us!" Eris said. "But what about the fourth?!"

"Why don't we leave the lieutenant colonel in charge for now, and later send Miriela to help?" Ripple asked. "She's already here, after all!"

"Understood! Then, we'll go with that!" Rafael said. "I'll hold the rear while we move into position!" The first wave of enemies had still not yet been wiped out, but if they didn't make their move quickly, it would be difficult to respond to the reinforcements. It was necessary for someone to guard their exposed flanks while they prepared to

counterattack.

“Then I’ll go talk to Miriela!” Ripple offered.

“Lady Eris, you and the lieutenant colonel will be in charge of forming the Paladins into four companies and deploying them!”

“Got it!” Eris replied. “After that, I’ll defend the west!”

“Then I’ll take the north!” Ripple said. “And have Miriela go south!”

“Once I’ve bought us some space, I’ll continue to hold the east!” Rafael replied.

The three nodded to each other and set off for their posts.

Chapter IV: Inglis, Age 15—Battle with the Prismers (2)

Having encircled Ahlemin, the second wave of bird magicite beasts slowly tightened the noose on the town. The defending Karelian army, meanwhile, rallied around portions of the Paladins in all four directions, and attempted to repel them. Knights perched atop the ramparts let loose volleys of long-range fire, but of course this was not a sufficient defense, and soon the battle for Ahlemin was in a tense tug-of-war for control.

Rafael, defending the east, threw himself into combat, his voice ragged as he called out to his forces. “If you’re wounded, don’t press yourself! Fall back to the tunnels! You’ll be safe below! If you’re unhurt, protect the wounded as they evacuate!”

The enemy being flying birds, it was hard for Rafael to imagine the creatures would infiltrate the tunnels. They couldn’t fly nearly as well in the cramped confines, and they would likely back off. Because there were knights at the ready in the tunnels, any attempt from the enemy to attack them there would be to his side’s advantage.

Rafael was glad the tunnels existed. If the wounded were left out in the open with nowhere to retreat, they would be easy prey for magicite beasts. That was the normal state of affairs, but because he knew of the tunnels, of course he’d take advantage of them to improve the chances of his allies surviving.

Rafael issued his commands. “Don’t spread too far apart from one another! There’s no need to push forward alone. Cover your allies, and take as few losses as possible! There’s a long battle ahead!”

The front lines are evenly matched despite the enemy’s numbers. We’re holding out with minimal losses. If we can keep this up... Rafael was wrapped in his thoughts when he saw a person leap out from behind, pushing far ahead of the rest of them into the midst of the enemy. “Ah! You’re too far forward! It’s dangerous! Come back!”

Despite Rafael’s efforts to help, he lost sight of the person thanks to the magicite beasts surrounding the lone fighter.

From there, a pillar of blue-white light shot into the sky.

Fwoosh!

It obliterated the magicite beasts. Floating within the light was the

leader of the Steelblood Front, the man in the black mask.

Rafael gasped.

“My apologies for getting in your way, but there are things I must do,” the Steelblood leader said. Another group of beasts closed in on him, perceiving him as a threat.

Thunk! Thunk! Thunk!

Struck by a barrage of sharp, powerful blows, they were cut to pieces thanks to a hail of thrusts from a golden spear. Sistia stood next to the black-masked man and looked back at Rafael. “Remember, you chose this. And we don’t take orders from you anyway!”

The black-masked man and Sistia must have finished freezing their transformed comrades inside the walls and were ready to deal with the humanoid magicite beasts outside the walls.

“Go for it! Just be careful, please!” Rafael had no reason to stop them, nor had he the right. Regardless, it seemed like they didn’t need his help.

“Worry about yourself first!” Sistia snapped.

“No matter, Sistia. We must hurry. Our comrades are waiting.”

“Pardon me.” Sistia bowed her head to the black-masked man, and they disappeared among the beasts.

“I wonder how it’s going in the other sectors?” To check, Rafael took to the skies and cast his eyes toward the rest of the town. Eris in the west and Ripple in the north were progressing much like he was. The lines were holding firm against the enemy.

Miriela and the lieutenant colonel were in the south. Their front was putting up the strongest fight—they were already beginning to advance.

“I can always count on her! Thanks, Miriela!”

He had sent Miriela and the detachment from the academy to the south. He regretted having to send students into battle, but the power of Silva and the others spoke for itself. If Miriela had been defending that front alone, its strength would likely resemble the other sectors.

She was raising good students—and some of the most notable, like Rafinha or Inglis or Leone, weren’t even here. Rafael was in no hurry to die, but the generation which would replace him was growing up. He felt reassured that he could focus on his own sector. But just as he began to advance, he heard knights shout in dismayed confusion behind him.

“Whoa! Hey, you! It’s dangerous!”

“One of the academy students?! You’re too far forward, get back!”

They were shouting at a short, slender girl with a blank expression—Yua. She was headed for the front line in a manner that was akin to

a morning jog. Despite her nonchalant attitude, her speed was incredible. She leaped off a wall to the roof of a nearby tower. Even though she looked as though she were doing nothing in particular, she was so fast that the knights lost sight of her.

“Huh?! Where’d she go?!”

“Up there! She’s fast!”

Yua turned back to the shocked and concerned knights. “Yo. I’m here to help.” She held up her index finger and thumb, pointing with her finger like a gun. “Bang.”

Whoosh!

A ray of light sprang forth from her finger and pierced the body of the nearest magicite beast. It hit the ground and disappeared.

“Squaaawk!”

The nearby beasts swarmed their foe.

“Bang, bang, bang!” To deal with the greater number, Yua formed both her hands into finger guns and fired barrages of light from both. One after another, the beasts fell, and their numbers thinned.

“Wow!”

“That kid’s amazing!”

The knights cheered in admiration.

Rafael murmured, “This girl... She doesn’t have a Rune, just like Chris! She really is just like Chris!” The surrounding knights hadn’t had the leeway to notice, but he’d seen no Rune on either of her hands. She had a power he didn’t comprehend, one nothing he knew could explain. In that way, she reminded him of his cousin. Between Silva with his special-class Rune and her, it made sense that the southern sector was doing well.

“Oop,” Yua lightly grunted as she leaped to another rooftop farther within the thinning mass of magicite beasts. Both her index fingers fired blasts of light without stopping.

But it was too much, even for her; there were still too many.

One beast slipped through the beams and crashed into Yua, screeching at her.

“Whoa.”

As light as she was, it easily sent her flying, and she fell from the roof.

“Look out!” Rafael dived to catch her before she hit the ground.

“Are you okay?! Uh...”

“Yua. Nice to meet you.”

“Thank you for your assistance, Yua, but it’s dangerous to fight

alone. Want to coordinate with us instead?”

Still in Rafael’s arms, Yua—although normally expressionless—showed a hint of tension. “Eek! Soz! Sorry! I’m so sorry!”

“Huh?! No, I’m not mad or anything, sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Huh? I’m not scared.”

“Oh... That’s good.”



“It’s just...you’re *her* big brother, so I bet you’re scary when you get mad.”

“‘Her’? You mean Rani?”

Yua nodded.

“Ha ha ha... Sorry about that. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Rani get quite that mad.”

“So...you’re not mad? You’re not going to be angry at me?”

“Yes, please don’t worry. Anyway, why don’t you work with us instead of rushing out on your own?”

“Sure, Huncules.” Yua’s languid eyes seemed to shine just a little.

“Er, is that supposed to be me?”

Yua nodded intently. Well, she was free to call him whatever she liked, even if it did puzzle him a little.

“A-Anyway, let’s do this!” Rafael set Yua down. The swarm of magicite beasts was upon them.

“Okay, then... Big bang!” A ray of light larger than the ones before shot from Yua’s right index finger. It was more than just big, though. It also mysteriously left a rainbow afterglow.

Fwoooooosh!

The blast was just as powerful as it looked. Piercing through beast after beast, it carried them away until they were mere specks before blowing them up.

“Wow, it’s so powerful!” several knights yelled in unison.

“Yua?! That was amazing!” Rafael exclaimed.

At some point, she had grown fluffy ears and a tail like Ripple, but they were shining like the rainbow. Both Yua’s power and range were more impressive than before; Rafael was stunned. Dragon Fang lacked a ranged attack, so it couldn’t be directly compared, but the Artifact shortsword he had been using to freeze humanoid magicite beasts from a distance couldn’t compare to her attacks now.

“Here I go!”

Not only that, but she could fire those large bursts of light continuously!

Fwoosh! Fwoosh! Fwoooooosh!

In no time at all, the area around them was burned clean of magicite beasts. She had taken down several buildings too, but Rafael was just relieved there was no collateral damage among their allies despite all the fighting on the front lines. So long as the people were okay, it was probably fine that Yua had let loose.

“All right, it’s opened up!”

“Let’s push the line forward!”

“Got it! Let’s go! We’ll push the magicite beasts back!”

The knights rolled like an avalanche into the gap created by Yua’s fire.

“Hmm, next is...” Yua looked around. She seemed to be at a loss for what to do now that her allies had moved in.

“Yua! Grab on to me! I’ll be your legs!” Rafael called out. He’d observed that she struggled to know how to fight in a coordinated group, so he would fly with her to where she’d be most effective. Then he could let her make the most of her power without hesitation. If enemies closed in again, he could protect her by cutting them down with Dragon Fang.

“Grab on? Like, a piggyback ride?” Yua tilted her head.

“Or you can sit on my shoulders—either way’s fine! I’ll take you to somewhere you can better shoot from!”

“Got it. Then...” Yua hopped up onto Rafael’s shoulders. “Yaaay. I’m riding on Huncules’s shoulders.”

Rafael laughed. “Well, if you’re helping us out, you deserve at least that much. Anyway, off I go!”

“Okay!”

Rafael leaped up, cutting through the nearby magicite beasts on the way, as he brought Yua to the front line. “Yua! Straight ahead!”

“Big bang.”

Fwoooooosh!

Yua’s shot precisely brought down a large clump of magicite beasts.

“On to the next!”

“Got it.”

A change of position, another blast. This one brought down just as many beasts.

“We’ll go around that way too! Now, Yua!”

“Kay. Big ba—?! ” Yua suddenly shuddered and went stiff.

Of course, she didn’t fire. Rafael backed away and looked up at her. “Yua? What’s wrong, are you tired?” It wasn’t surprising, given the number and power of her shots. She didn’t have a Rune, so Rafael couldn’t even begin to imagine how much each shot took out of her. She must have been worn out from fighting beside Miriela in the southern sector too. Had he pushed her too hard? If that was the case, Rafael felt terrible.

Yua didn’t respond to Rafael. Instead, she focused on a point far in the distance, her eyes wide open. “Dad...?” she mumbled almost

inaudibly.

“Yua?” Rafael followed her gaze.

And there, floating in the night sky, was a rainbow-colored *thing* so huge that Rafael didn’t have the words to express just how massive it was.

A majestic bird leisurely flapped its wings as it circled Ahlemin.

“The Prismer?! So it shows itself!”

The Prismer was moving as if it was assessing the situation or looking for something. As if drawing an arc, it closed the distance and finally came within their line of sight. The feathers which fell from its gigantic, rainbow body flew like darts in the sky, and an otherworldly rainbow-colored light enveloped Ahlemin.

“H-Here it comes! That’s the Prismer!”

“It’s terrifying, yet so beautiful!”

“Extremely! It gives me the shivers!”

The nearby knights were in a fluster. Rafael was thankful that the Prismer hadn’t charged immediately, instead giving the knights a moment to regain their composure.

But he didn’t expect what came next.

“Huh?! Hey, look at that!”

“Magicite beasts are coming from its feathers!”

The multicolored remnants in the Prismer’s wake shredded, changing into birdlike magicite beasts. The light which had flooded Ahlemin made way for a fearsome scene to unfold: a crowd of magicite beasts overtook the landscape. The knights had never fought this many before. They had held out valiantly against the earlier waves, but this was a set of reinforcements on a far greater scale.

“Ugh! There’s so many!”

“Impossible! There’s *how many* for each one of us now?!”

“This is insane! Can we hold them off?!”

A shudder ran through the knights. Their morale was crumbling at the sudden overwhelming sight. This didn’t come as a shock to Rafael.

“That makes sense, seeing so many—and it doesn’t stop!” The Prismer’s wake crossed in front of Rafael, and one after another, magicite beasts were brought forth.

The enemy’s number was increasing even as he watched. The gap in strength between the two sides was a growing cavity, getting wider with every moment. With the Prismer circling Ahlemin’s perimeter, there was no escape for the beleaguered army. “Yua! I’m setting you down! Stay hidden!”

“Why? I’m really enjoying the ride.”

“It’s dangerous! I’m about to attack the Prismer itself! You get down and stay safe!”

What kind of attack was still an open question, but if he didn’t do

something about the countless magicite beasts, their forces would be overrun before long. The pocket they were trapped in would be worn down, and finally wiped out. It would be best to destroy the Prismer itself, but... But wounding it severely enough to make it stop, or drawing its attention and leading it away would also work.

At any rate, they needed to stop the flow of reinforcements, or it would be too late. The best defense was a good offense.

"Then I'll come along too..." Yua, unlike the knights, was not rattled. Rafael got the sense that she was calmer in this situation than he was.

"What?! That'd help, but... No! It's too dangerous!" As strong as she was, she was still just a student. There was no way he could put her in the danger of a direct attack on the Prismer.

"This is no time to worry about that! We need as much power as we can muster!" Eris interjected as she arrived in her Flygear.

"Lady Eris?! Is everything going well in your sector?!"

"It doesn't matter! We have no choice now but to attack the Prismer! You understand that, right? There's no point in trying to hold out against such an extraordinary number of beasts!"

"Yes, you're right," Rafael said. Their own forces were limited, while the Prismer's was infinite. The only choice in this situation was to target the source of the disparity with a focused attack.

Another voice rang out. "Eris! Rafael! Yua!"

"Ripple!"

"Lady Ripple!"

"Lady Dog-Ears..."

Ripple appeared in her own Flygear. "If Eris is here, she must be thinking the same thing! With that many, we can't defend! We need to take out their leader! Sorry, Yua, but can you help out?"

"I know it's scary, but please! We need to throw everything we have into one attempt! Think of it as helping Rafael!" Eris said.

The Prismer was an extremely fast learner, and if repeatedly struck with the same kind of attack, it would quickly develop defenses, not only nullifying but in fact beginning to absorb those same attacks. In addition, its life force also gave it innately fast healing. In other words, the most effective way to attack was to hit it with one high-powered attack before it became resistant. Essentially, Eris was right: they had to strike now.

"Got it. That was what I was thinking from the start," Yua said.

"Ooh, Yua! That's what I like to hear!" Ripple replied.

"Saving a cute guy is justice."

"Ha ha. Yua, you just can't resist a pretty face, can you?"

"It's the undeniable truth."

"E-Everyone! This is no time to joke around!" Rafael protested.

“This isn’t joking! I’m completely serious! We need to do our best with everything we have! If you call on us because you’re holding back for the wrong reasons, I won’t help!” Eris insisted.

“That’s right!” Ripple said. “We’re fighting so we can all laugh together later! C’mon, Rafael! Listen to us!”

“Lady Eris, Lady Ripple!”

“Oop.” Yua hopped down from Rafael’s shoulders and landed lightly on a nearby rooftop. Bounding forward from it, she set off toward the Prismer. “This conversation seems like it’s gonna take a while, so I’m going on ahead.”

“Eh?! Yua!” Rafael called after her.

With Rafael being distracted, Eris called out to the nearby knights. “Everyone, listen! We’re going to launch a direct assault on the Prismer! We’ll finish it off at once and prevent the appearance of any more magicite beasts!”

“It gets used to the same attacks *real* quick!” Ripple explained. “So we need to focus—we’ve only got one shot at this! We all need to work together!”

“Rafael will take the lead! Please, everyone, follow me!”

At Eris’s final call, shouts arose from the surrounding knights.

“As you order, Lady Eris!”

“Let’s do this! Our lives are on the line!”

“I’ve always entrusted you with my life, Sir Rafael!”

The voices rising, one by one, gave Rafael courage.

Another Flygear, carrying Miriela and Silva, joined them in the skies.

“Let’s go, Rafael!” Miriela said.

“I’ll do my best as well!” Silva added.

“Thank you, everyone... All right! Let’s go! Our target is the Prismer! We charge forth, ignoring the weaker beasts, and launch a simultaneous strike! Load each Flygear to maximum capacity! Follow me!”

Rafael surged forth at full speed, picking up Yua along the way, and headed for the Prismer. An earth-shattering war cry followed him. The Flygears of the Karelian army, suddenly on the counterattack, followed Rafael in his charge toward the floating Prismer as a united mass. From the perspective of the knights on the ground, it seemed as if a gigantic bird was attacking the Prismer.

In all of this, the newborn magicite beasts did not remain silent. One after another, they swarmed on the attackers.

“Aaaagh!”

“Gaaaahhh!”

“Are you okay?! Ngh!”

“Don’t falter! Go forth! Destroy the Prismer! Aaaah!”

With the knights abandoning their defense for an all-out attack, there were bound to be casualties. Flygear after Flygear crashed to the ground, carrying their knights along.

“Ugh! Of course, they’re throwing everything they have at us too!” Rafael said.

“That means we’ve drawn their attention!” Eris replied. “Eyes forward!”

“Eris is right, Rafael!” Ripple said. “The Prism is our target!”

Some sacrifices were unavoidable, but the magicite beasts could not stop them.

Rafael and the others were about to close in on the Prism.

“We’ve made it in! Prepare for an all-out attack!” The instant Rafael gave his order, the Prism’s behavior changed.

“Cawwwwwwww!”

Facing Rafael, the leader of the oncoming group, the Prism opened its maw. There, a swirl of polychromatic light coalesced. Strangely, there was no sense of malice or hostility. But still, it was clear that it was about to fire something.

“Ah! Spread out! Once you’ve evaded its attack, open fire!” Rafael ordered.

The two hiral menaces with him quickly passed along the order. “Ngh! Everyone, scatter!”

“What’s that attack?! Hurry up! Get away!”

Skreeeeech!

A swirling beam of every color gushed from the Prism’s mouth.

“Ugh...! Hold on tight, Yua!” Rafael yelled.

“Mm. My reward.”

The light was close enough to brush Rafael’s nose as he sharply turned away.

“It’s fast! But not fast enough!” Eris barked.

“Can’t let a hiral menace get hit!” Ripple agreed. Their Flygear also dived out of the way.

“Principal Miriela! I’m sorry. I had to bank sharply to evade,” Silva said. “Are you all right?”

“Y-Yes. I’m fine, but—” Miriela looked out over the expanse of those who could not evade.

“Aaaaagh!” At first it sounded like their screams were echoing, but then it became clear—the screams had never stopped. Not a single Flygear was falling either. Even bathed in the light, they remained airworthy.

“Eh...?!”

“What’s going on?!”

“Nothing happened?!”

The knights caught by the light were screaming in confusion...before transforming into magicite beasts.

“Wh—?!” Rafael, Eris, and Ripple all gasped in shock. According to what they knew, it was a reaction between prism powder and the Prismer’s power that had caused humans to become magicite beasts earlier. Those who weren’t carrying prism powder had been safe from the transformation—or so they’d thought.

Rafael didn’t understand. “No way! Even people without prism powder?!”

“A light that turns people into magicite beasts?! It can even do this?” Eris said.

“This is bad! If it keeps shooting that all over, everyone will...!” Ripple didn’t want to finish her sentence.

“Ugh...!” Rafael grunted. “Let’s pull back and regroup!”

“We can’t, Rafael!” Eris insisted. “We’ve made it this far! We need to keep going!”

“Ah, it’s gone now,” Yua calmly interjected, pointing at the Prismer. While they were confused, the Prismer had flapped its wings and passed them by. Its speed was astounding for its size. Even at full speed, a Flygear couldn’t keep up.

Without cutting its speed, the Prismer then spun in the air to face them. Then, it soared upward for a moment before letting its weight carry it through a sudden dive, its gigantic beak thrusting into the ground.

Slaaamm!

Its momentum sent cracks running from the rim of the crater it created. The earth rumbled, and a huge cloud of dust kicked up.

“What?!” Rafael yelled.

“What’s the Prismer doing?!”

“I dunno, but it’s nothing good!”

It was obvious before long. Another blast of multicolored light followed the cloud of dust, stretching far above Ahlemin’s ramparts, and its scope was wide enough to surround the town completely. Not only that, but it was rushing along the ground toward Rafael.

“Pull up! Get away from it!” he ordered.

“Yeah! We can make it!” Eris agreed.

“We’ll be okay!” Ripple encouraged. “Calm down, and evade it!”

But their calls were in vain. Some of the knights were caught up in the attack.

“There.” Yua pointed, and their gazes followed.

Boooooom!

The sound of an impact deafened them.

“Squaaaaaawk!”

The gigantic Prismer roared as it was flung far away. It bounced repeatedly, leaving gigantic ruts in the ground.

“Wh—?!”

“The Prismer?! ”

“It got blown away?! ”

And just where the Prismer had been...

“Look. It’s Boobies.”

An attractive girl, a stunning beauty in fact, floated as her hair swayed in the wind. In her hands was a gigantic sword, longer than she was tall, that had just completed a downward stroke.

Chapter V: Inglis, Age 15—Battle with the Prismer (3)

Rafael couldn't believe it. "Chris?!"

"She made it in time!" Eris said.

"Inglis! Yippee! Good job!" Ripple said.

Miriela was just as relieved to see her student. "Thaaank goodness... If that attack had made it to the town, our side would have been wiped out!"

"No better reinforcements are possible! After all, Inglis has already taken down one Prismer!" Silva said.

The center of attention, Inglis, opened her eyes, the gleam clear to everyone. "Wow... So this is a fully formed Prismer!"

Her attack had blown the Prismer away—rather, it hadn't done anything but knock the Prismer away. Even an attack with her dragonscale sword, with Aether Shell active, hadn't left so much as a scratch. Her Aether Shell technique infused the blade of her weapon with aether, making it more than just a physical attack and thus effective against magicite beasts. Such power combined with the sword's own strength and sharpness would have been enough to cleave the demihuman larval Prismer in two. Even the hardy scales of Fufailbane, the ancient dragon, would have been sliced through, with grave consequences.

So at the very minimum, the Prismer physically outshone even Fufailbane. The proof was standing in front of them. It was the strongest thing in the world, what she'd dreamed of fighting since she was a little girl—and unlike the black-masked man, Fufailbane, or Evel after having absorbed Fufailbane and becoming a mechanical ancient dragon, it had no conception of avoiding a fight. It was the perfect foe. Now was the time when Inglis Eucus would put all her training to the test. Or, put another way, someone would finally put her to the test!

From the looks of things, Rafael was still okay, the dangerous attack targeted at Ahlemin had been averted, and no major damage had been done. She'd made it in time. From here on was her long-awaited encounter with the Prismer.

"I'm glad to see you're doing well. Ever since we first met in Ahlemin, I've been looking forward to the day when you were back on your feet and I could take you on." Inglis laughed joyously and cast a

beaming smile at the Prismer she'd blown far away.

A Flygear swooped down, the *Star Princess*, with Rafinha at the helm. "Chris! Are you okay?"

"Yeah, Rani. Looks like I made it just in time. See? Rafael and the others are here, and they seem like they're doing fine." Inglis pointed up toward Rafael.

"That's great!"

"Yeah. If we were late due to that side trip, it would have been bad. But now..." Inglis laughed. "Now I can do as I please!"

"Well, okay, just this once. But first, there's something we need to do! C'mon, get in!"

"Yes, you're right. We need to make sure no one interferes."

"Phrasing! We need to get everyone to safety!"

As Inglis leaped aboard the *Star Princess*, Rafael descended to meet them. "Rani! Chris!"

"Ah! Rafael!" Rafinha jumped straight for him, knocking Yua from his shoulders through her tackle hug, and Inglis caught her and brought her aboard the *Star Princess*.

"Whoa! Rani?!"

"Thank goodness. I get to see you again! I'm so happy!"

Rafael took a moment to fully understand where his sister was coming from. "Sorry, Rani. You must have been worried about me."

Rafinha sobbed. "I was! I was really, really, really worried! So much that I couldn't eat!"

No matter how much she tried to put a brave face on things, it was only natural that she would lose her composure when coming face-to-face with Rafael. Rafinha was kind, compassionate, still young—those were the traits Inglis found most adorable in her. Inglis wanted to support that smile honestly, without indulging her or encouraging false hopes. Although, if Inglis took issue with any of what Rafinha had said, she thought the "couldn't eat" part was a bit of an exaggeration, putting it lightly.

The two hial menaces rushed over.

"Inglis! We were waiting for you!" Ripple said.

"You must have been the one who deflected the Prismer's attack! Well done!" Eris said.

"Yeah! How'd you do it?"

"It was no big deal. That wall of light looked dangerous, but fortunately, it was running along the ground—cutting the ground away got rid of it." Inglis patted her dragonscale sword. Rather than smashing aether into the wall as a counteracting force, physically cutting the ground away was quicker and less of a drain on her. All she'd had to do was thrust her dragonscale sword into the ground with Aether Shell active and then run alongside the barrier. She'd kept

going and attacked the Prismer, only to be impressed that she'd blown it away rather than hurt it.

"I see. Well, *I* think it was a big deal," Eris said, gaping in awe at the trail of destruction Inglis had left.

"Yeah... You did all that in an instant..." Ripple agreed, gesturing at the ground. It was as if a moat even wider than the town itself had appeared out of nowhere.

"Anyway, I'm sorry I'm late. Thank you for your patience." Inglis bowed to the two, a graceful smile on her face. "And...thank you for leaving me a very nice catch." She chuckled.

"Ha ha ha. Wooow, what a cute smile," Ripple teased.

"This is hardly the time for small talk, but...why the new outfit?" Eris asked.

"Ah, right. Specifically as a temporary measure to deal with the current situation, His Majesty has granted Rani and me command of the Royal Guard, with these uniforms as proof of that. He deemed them appropriate in light of Karelia's culture and traditions—of course, Rani has full authority, and I am merely her lieutenant."

"What?! Command of the Royal Guard?!" they all shouted.

"Yes. And His Majesty has ordered me to destroy the Prismer."

"Look, Rafael!" Rafinha jumped over to the *Star Princess* to stand next to Inglis, and they turned their backs to display the insignia on their capes.

"That insignia! It can only be given by His Majesty's order!" Eris gasped.

"Y-Yeah. So I guess he truly means to let Inglis do her thing?" Ripple pondered.

"Yes. He is quite perceptive... Perhaps he had the same thought as we did."

"And since royal orders are absolute..." Inglis began. "I pardon the intrusion, but may I inform everyone here of their places in our secret plan?" She held up a finger and smiled softly.

"Secret plan?" Rafael asked. "Chris, Rani, what do you two have cooked up? I'm grateful for the help, but there's no need for you two to risk your lives. I'd rather do it my—"

Eris and Ripple covered his mouth as he spoke.

"Now, now, Rafael. Royal orders *are* absolute," Ripple said.

"Yes," Eris agreed. "We don't have any time to waste, so let's go along with it!"

"Thank you! Very well, then!" At Eris and Ripple's nods, Inglis took her Flygear high into the sky and called out in a loud yet dignified voice.

"Brave knights who have gathered here to slay the Prismer! Listen, please! We have been entrusted with command by former

Royal Guard commander Reddas Ayren to stand in his stead, and have come here on His Majesty's order to drive back the Prismer! His Majesty's commands override all else, so I humbly ask you to follow our plan!" As before, Inglis brandished the insignia on her cape as she spoke.

"Captain of the Royal Guard?! In place of Reddas, who His Majesty trusted so well?!"

"But that insignia is the real thing! And their uniforms are the same as those of Lady Eris and Lady Ripple—wait, is this girl a new hial menace?!"

"She just might be! Look at her beauty, what she did to the Prismer, the strength she showed protecting us!"

"Ah! I knew His Majesty would foresee our plight and prepare for it!"

It was perhaps because of the Paladins' familiarity with Eris and Ripple that Inglis was mistaken for a new hial menace. It showed the trust the knights had for them. Maybe King Carlias had taken this reaction, as well as the symbolism, into account when choosing these uniforms. In any case, since time was of the essence, it was far better than being rejected.

"I'm sorry for not introducing myself earlier. I am Inglis Eucus, lieutenant colonel of the Royal Guard. The colonel herself is—"

"I'm Rafinha Bilford! Sorry to barge in, but this is to make sure as many people make it home alive as possible! Please listen to us!"

Inglis and Rafinha bowed deeply.

"Rafinha *Bilford*?!"

"Ah, she must be Rafael's sister!"

"His little sister, huh! They look so much alike!"

The knights deeply respected Rafael thanks to his day-to-day command of them. They'd accept any family member of his.

"Everyone! As these girls say, royal orders are absolute! Listen to them!" Eris said.

"We hial menaces ask you to follow them!" Ripple added.

The knights all had the same response.

"Understood! Lady Rafinha, Lady Inglis! Your orders?"

Inglis nodded and continued. "Then I humbly present the orders of the colonel of the Royal Guard! All forces will immediately evacuate to the tunnels below Ahlemin! The Paladins will lead a Flygear squadron to protect those evacuating! After withdrawal, repel any magicite beasts that invade the tunnels!"

The plan was essentially to flee, stay within fortifications, and defeat any enemies that might follow. Aside from the Prismer, there were countless other magicite beasts still on the field. Even after withdrawing to the tunnels, they would be assaulted mercilessly.

Cooperation from the Paladins who could hear her would be vital in limiting losses.

“Are you telling us to run away?!”

“Are we of no assistance?!”

“It’s true that if we were caught in that huge attack and turned into magicite beasts, we’d become a liability, but...”

Downcast, the knights bit their lips.

“I assure you, you aren’t a liability.” Inglis smiled gently.

That’s right. It wasn’t. They weren’t useless. They weren’t a burden. Inglis had a different reason, a simple one; she just wanted them to stay out of it so she could have her one-on-one with the Prismer. That was all, but it was, of course, not necessary to explain this so bluntly.

“But Lady Inglis, if we all retreat, then what of the Prismer?” a knight asked.

Inglis nodded. “Yes, allow me—I, Inglis Eucus, will launch an assault on the Prismer and prevent it from using its large-scale attack! After that, we will launch an all-out assault with everything we have! That is the plan.”

“Ah! So you have a way to prevent that attack!”

“And you want us to conserve our strength until then!”

“Of course. It’s reasonable to avoid wearing ourselves out before the attack!”

The knights clapped their hands together and nodded.

Well, that wasn’t precisely a lie. I do know a way to keep the Prismer from attacking—by taking it down. A defeated foe cannot attack again. Once I do that, our time to counterattack will never come...but plans change.

A skilled leader knew to give people a reason to listen. Additionally, once her allies evacuated, she could fight with no worries. She couldn’t enjoy herself while many of them were falling. She wanted a one-on-one fight without outside interference. That way, she could focus.

“You skilled knights here, pass the message along to those still fighting in the town!” After speaking, Inglis whispered to Rafinha. “Rani...”

“Huh? What is it?”

“One last bit of advice from your lieutenant. Try to inspire them.”

“Got it!” Rafinha took a deep breath and called out, “I can use a healing Gift! Bring the wounded to me! And remember, the Prismer and its beasts are terrifying, but we are the last line of defense! Let’s be a shield for people in need, and let’s return to them—all of us!”



The forces in Ahlemin were the strongest Karelia could bring to bear. If they were overrun here, it would all be over. *Be determined* was the meaning of her words.

A roar of applause rose from the knights as Rafinha spoke, her fists clenched.

“That was great! I knew you could do it,” Inglis said.

“R-Really? I don’t think I said anything that important...” Rafinha looked a bit startled.

“Sometimes it’s important *who* says something.” Rafinha’s words resonated because they came sincerely from her heart. If Inglis had said the same thing, it wouldn’t have been as persuasive; even she was self-aware enough to know that was because she was so enthusiastic about fighting the Prismers.

It was the same for Rafael, Eris, and Ripple. A holy knight and hial menaces facing a Prismer would not be able to escape from their tragic determination and resolve. That tension would be reflected in their voices and above all, the words they chose.

They would never put it in the same way as Rafinha had, just like Inglis wouldn’t.

“I...I’m not being irresponsible, right?”

“It’s fine. I’ll make sure everyone’s safe.” Inglis patted Rafinha’s head before calling out to the knights. “Quickly! To your posts!”

“Yes!” The knights changed course and began to retreat back toward the walls.

“Principal Miriela, Silva—you too! Go along with everyone and help protect their retreat!”

Miriela and Silva nodded.

“U-Understood!”

“Call for us if you need us!”

They seemed to be in agreement.

“And then, I’ll proceed with my assault on the Pris—”

“W-Wait a moment!” Eris interjected.

“That’s right, Inglis!” Ripple agreed. Inglis had wanted to go on the attack immediately, but the two hial menaces caught her by the arm.

“What is it?”

“You know what! I can agree with part of that plan, but...” Eris began.

“Yes,” Ripple said. “If our forces had been hit with that attack, they would have been wiped out—no, worse, turned into more magicite beasts. So it’s not a mistake to pull back, but...”

Rafael stepped in front of Inglis, trying to hold her back. “But sending you in alone is too dangerous! At least let us come along!”

“That’s right!” Eris said. “We’re relying on you to help us, but that doesn’t mean we want to throw you to the wolves!”

“We called you here. We should take responsibility too!” Ripple insisted.

Inglis quietly shook her head. “No. Holy knights and hial menaces are humanity’s last hope—we need to avoid risking you in a fight with the Prismer where you won’t demonstrate your full power. If you take a full-on attack from the Prismer, not even a hial menace will be safe.”

“Well...” Eris trailed off.

“That’s true...” Ripple admitted.

“And demonstrating your true power as you fight alongside me holds its own problems. I’m not here just to fight the Prismer; I’m here to prevent Rafael from losing his life. Rani doesn’t want that, Rafael. Neither do I.”

“Chris?!” Rafael exclaimed. “You know everything?!”

“I’m sorry. I explained it to Rani as well. She needed to know everything before making her own decision on what to do.”

“Rafael...I’m sorry, I didn’t know before...” Rafinha mumbled, sounding close to tears.

“No, that’s fine, Rani,” Rafael said. “That’s the path I chose.”

“But royal orders are absolute! So listen to Chris! I believe in her! If she says she can do it, she can! And if you help guard the retreat, that will really cut down on our losses! That’s the most important part!”

“Rani!” Rafael protested.

“It’s not my place to say this, but...” Inglis began. “Rafael, I remember when Ymir’s castle was attacked, and you ignored my mother and put yourself in danger trying to help. If you stay back, it would be a relief to me.”

“Chris... You remember that far back?”

Now that Inglis thought of it, she had been an infant at the time. “Uhh...well, actually, my mother told me about it later! Anyway, I’d appreciate it if you guarded the retreat and left this to me.”

“Okay, Chris... But if you end up in trouble, I don’t know whether I could hold back. I don’t think I could bear having you get hurt for my sake.”

“Thank you, Rafael. But don’t worry. I don’t intend to—”

“Squaaaaawk!”

The Prismer made its return, its cries ringing with anger.

“Here it comes! Time for a fair fight, one-on-one!” Inglis somersaulted from the *Star Princess* and sprinted toward the Prismer.

Behind her, Eris's voice echoed. "It's tough, even for a Prismer! It has a high degree of adaptability, and if you use the same attack over and over, it won't just become immune—it will start to absorb it! Keep that in mind as you fight!"

"Got it! Thanks for the advice!" Inglis turned back to Eris and smiled cutely. As Inglis ran, a smile still on her face, the Prismer stared at her with palpable wariness.

"Squaaawk!"

As its voice rang out, a rainbow-colored light rocketed outward in all directions and turned into a wall, broad and high. It was like a cage surrounding just the two of them.

"So you're not letting me get away, huh? I feel the same way."

If the Prismer was focused only on Inglis, there would be no need to knock it away. Plus, she wouldn't have to worry about her allies getting caught up in any damage. She figured she owed it thanks for the chance to completely devote herself to the fight.

"Aether Pierce!" Inglis fired Aether Pierce, not at the Prismer but at the wall. It silently bounced off and disappeared into the ground. The cage, meanwhile, was completely unaffected.

It was quite solid. She couldn't say too much, as Aether Pierce wasn't a particularly impressive use of aether. Still, without wavering, the cage had managed to repel aether. On the other hand, it merely repelled the attack, and it didn't seem to have any offensive use.

I think I can use it as a foothold! "Very well, then!" Inglis unslung her dragonscale sword from her back and held it at her side as she rushed toward the Prismer.

The Prismer prepared a counterattack, but as it did, she activated Aether Shell. Leaping up, she angled to the right, outside the Prismer's vision. Her jump was so forceful that she almost hit the wall—exactly what she wanted. Flipping around, she bounded again off the wall and soared yet higher.

Speeding like a fired bullet, she reached a point on the wall above the Prismer's head. The Prismer was still looking at where she'd turned right. By using the wall's rebound, she'd managed to get a step ahead of her opponent's reactions.

This time, I'm going to make the first move!

Kicking off the wall again, Inglis sprang toward the Prismer below. Winding up her dragonscale sword, she deactivated Aether Shell. That way, it wouldn't be active when she attacked, and she could avoid the Prismer gaining resistance to the aether which permeated the blade. Being able to precisely switch it on and off in response to the demands of a high-speed battle was proof of how far

she'd come. During all of this, she converted aether to mana.

"Ice!"

Clink!

Blue ice wrapped around the dragonscale sword, encasing it. She often used ice magic to form a sword, but this way was even easier—the ice only had to conform to an existing blade, not shape one itself. "Haaah!" Inglis slashed at the Prismer's neck as she dived.

Thunk!

It felt hard—as if it was pushing her sword away. She'd left only a small jagged scratch on the Prismer's skin, but that was fine for now. A probing assault didn't need to leave damage. Upon landing, Inglis immediately slashed once more—this time upward—aiming for the scratches. The wound her blow left was only around half as deep as her previous try.

"Squaaawk!"

The Prismer was ready, thrusting its beak down like a spear. Inglis's Aether Shell kicked in right then, keeping the momentum with which she'd raised her sword as she leaped into the air. The beak missed her, crashing into the ground. She was already in position to twist and slam her sword back down.

She deactivated Aether Shell. Her ice-clad sword caught the lower neck of the Prismer. This time, the blow left no trace. As Eris had said, repeating the same attack had reduced its effectiveness.

Continuing, she swept her sword back in from the side. This time, not only did it fail to wound the Prismer, but the faint scars from her first and second attacks faded away.

"I see...!" The second attack was halved, the third nullified, the fourth absorbed. The Prismer certainly was adaptable. "But that's not all I've got!"

Inglis Eucus did not shy away from a tough battle. An exciting fight challenged her as she took on her opponents at their strongest. Besides, she wanted to see more of this Prismer's learning ability in action. That's why she'd taken the initiative this time.

"Flame!"

Fwooosh!

The dragonscale sword erupted in flames, the fire replacing the

ice that had enveloped the blade. She hadn't learned how to control mana to create a sword entirely of flame yet, but she was at least able to set an existing one ablaze. She wanted to try as many elements as she could. The Prismer would gain resistance to those as well, but then she would return to ice.

Was there a limit on how many resistances it could have? Would it regain a vulnerability? That was what she was curious about. She also wanted to determine whether resistances would be lost after enough time had passed. Plus, the more she kept the Prismer busy, the safer things would be as her allies completed their evacuation to the tunnels.

"How about this?!" While dodging the Prismer's attacks, Inglis struck with her flame-wreathed sword. Fortunately, the cage of light made for good footing, allowing her to flit around the Prismer.

This vexed the Prismer, which tried to bat her down, but it was clearly unable. The sight of the battle gave the watching knights courage and fired up their morale.

"How's she moving like that?! She's fast! Almost *too* fast!"

"Is that Lady Inglis?! I can't make out a thing!"

They could only see a blur that kept darting around the Prismer, relentlessly attacking it.

"It's working! The Prismer's losing its cool!"

"We can do this! All right, we just need to hold out!"

But the Prismer would not sit idly by.

"Cawwww!"

As if it had become impatient, the Prismer suddenly let out a deafening call. At the same time, it forcefully spread its wings, creating an intense gale.

"Gah!" Quickly, Inglis brought her sword before herself and used it as a shield. But rather than trying to hold out against the storm, she took advantage of it to put some distance between herself and the Prismer. Heavy though her sword was, the wind carried her far backward, proof of its intensity.

However, this seemed only a byproduct of what the Prismer intended. As the cloud of dust from the storm cleared, Inglis began to notice a strange brightness. It was still night, but the world around her was as bright as midday. When her vision completely returned, she could see what was happening with just a glance. "Oh!"

Rainbow-colored feathers were floating down from the Prismer. They shone even brighter than the Prismer itself, and there were hundreds—no, *thousands* of them. The rainbow feathers dancing in the air were simply beautiful to behold. It was truly a fantastic sight.

“You’re not just here to put on a light show for a lady, are you? And even if you are, I’d prefer something with a bit more force!”

As if in response, the feathers changed their trajectories. Leaving trails as they flew, they suddenly rained down on Inglis. If she couldn’t figure out how to defend, she’d be overpowered by an attack from which there was no escape. It was too dense; it was overwhelming.

“That’s a nice attack! In that case...!” Inglis formed Aether Shell around herself and readied her sword. If she didn’t strike at the Prismers, using aether merely to repel the attack, she didn’t think it would adapt to aether-based attacks. Her aether flowed through her hands and into her sword, and she swept away the rainbow feathers that were closing in on her.

Fwoosh!

Several of the feathers disappeared—but her slash had handled only seven or eight of them. That was nothing compared to the total number, and many more were closing in.

“Haaaah!” Inglis continued her swift work with the sword, sweeping away any feathers that threatened her. It was a battle of the feathers’ density versus the speed of her blade.

Tmp-tmp-tmp-tmp-tmp!

Her high-speed swordplay created an invisible wall against the feathers which approached from all directions. But she couldn’t completely defend herself against a Prismers’ attack. A few feathers slipped through that wall and brushed against her.

“Ow...!” A small pain shot through her thigh. Glancing down, she saw a cut and a smear of blood. It wasn’t much of a wound, but it had cut through the defenses of her Aether Shell. Charged with aether, her skin was stronger than sturdy armor or the scales of a lesser dragon. She laughed. “So if all those had hit me, I’d be dead, wouldn’t I?”

Inglis relished the idea. It was the thought of such a dangerous battle that made her blood boil and her limbs dance. It took her to new heights.

As she continued, more and more feathers slipped by her sword. A scratch on the right arm. Tears in her clothes at the belly, the hips, the neckline. There was no doubt that she was being slowly overwhelmed.

“Then... Dragon lore!” *More power!*

What appeared next to Inglis wasn’t the usual pale, translucent dragon tail. It was pale and translucent, yes—but the shape it took was the dragonscale sword held by a pair of her arms. “All right!” It

had taken on that form rather than the tail thanks to Inglis's increased familiarity with this power. It was proof she'd come into her own as a user of dragon lore.

Maybe my battle with Rochefort held particular significance for my growth. I think I got the hang of things when I used the dragon lore then, Inglis thought.

When she'd practiced aboard the *Star Princess* on the way to Ahlemin, she'd been able to recreate part of herself rather than a dragon tail with dragon lore. And that image of her arm moved just as swiftly and just as precisely as the real thing.

"I like this outfit!" So I can't let it get torn up anymore. I want to take it back with me and admire myself in the mirror from time to time.

The sword and multiple arms created with dragon lore began to sweep away the feathers alongside her. The increased number of attacks kept any more feathers from slipping through. She had completely blocked the Prismer's attack, even if all it accomplished was reducing the number of feathers. However, the Prismer sensed this and changed its approach.

"Cawwww!"

It leaped up to the ceiling of its cage, at which point its entire body began to glow, as if it were one gigantic bullet of light—as if it wanted to smash its entrapped prey in one fell swoop. It was a bold move by the Prismer, aimed at crushing her entirely. The amount of destructive power behind such an attack was unimaginable. Inglis knew she couldn't take it head-on.

The Prismer suddenly dived toward her.

"It's fast...!" Unbelievably fast, given its size, but not so fast that she couldn't track it. She ducked and weaved through the rain of feathers as she avoided the Prismer.

Using the cage of light as a foothold let her move unpredictably and dodge those feathers. It was a clear advantage for her. "I'll draw it in as close as possible!"

But her plan was shattered in the blink of an eye, because the cage of light shrunk. It closed in rapidly, taking away her room to move around. And then, the Prismer glowed again.

She had nowhere left to run.

Inglis laughed. "Wonderful! I knew you could do it!" All her escape routes were blocked. She could no longer evade, and she couldn't take a brute-force attack from a Prismer. She was completely cornered.

So, there was only one move left: take the Prismer down. Kill or be killed.

Inglis had yet to see the true extent of the Prismer's power. Her ideal of taking on a foe at its strongest—and overcoming that strength—was yet unrealized. If she didn't defeat it now, this would end in a permanent loss for her. This truly was a fully mature Prismer. It had given her a perfect duel, one she couldn't have predicted. She'd had to experience it for herself.

But this was fine! No more running, no more buying time! She would crush it!

“Then I'll go all out as well!”

Her dragonscale sword glowed brightly, imbued with all the aether she could muster. It was a blade that could handle her full power. Its pale-blue color shone brighter and brighter, and swelled as everyone watched. It was a glow as intense as the Prismer's own.

“That's not all! One step further!”

No, more than that! she willed herself. *Swallow it!*

As she squeezed even more aether from herself, the blade grew brighter still. “Take this!” With a forceful step forward, she swung her sword down. At the same time, she released the aether contained in its blade. A mass of aether following the sword's path pushed away the feathers blocking it, and it rushed toward the Prismer.

Fwoooooosh!

The aether following the slash and the Prismer crashed into each other. The two forces strained upon contact in the air with a blinding flash and a deafening roar. The Prismer faced a fierce struggle.

This is my chance! Without any hesitation, Inglis leaped forward. As if on cue, the feathers parted, opening her way. Nothing could stop her now.

In the blink of an eye, she dashed to where the Prismer struggled against the aether. Her dragon lore was concentrated as intensely as she could manage it. Inglis's dragon lore didn't have much range, but she was already close enough. Within the glow, the Prismer turned toward her, sensing her presence.

“Too late! Haaaaaaaaah!”

Aether Cross Lore!

Her dragon lore took the shape of arms swinging a sword sideways, rushing toward where the forces collided.

Booooooooooooooooooooooooooom!

The gigantic explosion roared as loud as its shine was overwhelming; it was as if the sun had appeared for a moment in the night sky. The aether sword-flash, detonated by the dragon lore,

increased its destructive power many times over and swallowed the Prismer.

“Squaaawk!”

Inglis heard the Prismer scream in pain as the explosion blew her away. Aether Cross Lore had destroyed the cage of light, so its walls weren't there to catch her, and she was rocketed away a considerable distance. As a result, she had time in the air to twist and land on her feet.

She slid along the ground as she touched down. “Maybe I was a little too close!” Due to that, she had been struck by the shock waves. Her already-torn outfit was a mess; this was a matter of grave importance.

Getting used enough to dragon lore that it mimicked her own limbs was nice, but creating a replica of Fufailbane's tail had given her the ability to attack from a safer distance. It seemed to have increased in power, but there was still room for improvement in terms of how that power was applied. Her techniques were showing rapid progress. She'd have to keep pushing their limits.

“The next time we fight—” Inglis began to call out to the Prismer before suddenly cutting off. “I'm sorry. It seems there won't be a next time.”

The upper half of its body had been completely blown away, leaving only the lower parts of the giant birdlike creature intact. They fell to the ground and rolled to a stop.

Inglis felt a twinge of regret, but no real dismay. Transforming Highlanders into magicite beasts was one thing, but this Prismer had affected even people of the surface. Inglis didn't have any knowledge of other mature Prismers, but she had to guess this had been one of the strongest. She'd never read any books or heard any legends about one having such an ability; it was entirely unheard of. If it were more common, humans would be wiped from the surface. So she couldn't just keep this Prismer alive as a pet. It would be too dangerous. Even she, with Fufailbane's dragon lore and an extraordinarily strong sword forged from his scales, had been in a situation where a single misstep could have gotten her killed.

And most importantly, this was what Rafinha wanted. In order to fulfill Rafinha's purehearted hope that her brother would survive, Inglis could not let the Prismer live. Her own enjoyment came second to the urge to protect her beloved cousin's hopes, even if she was doing it in an entirely grandparental fashion.

“The Prismer has fallen! It's fallen!”

“Without the use of a hial menace?!”

“Incredible! What a fierce battle!”

“Truly His Majesty knew best!”

“All right, we’ve got to do our part too! Wipe out the remaining magicite beasts and we win!”

Even as the cheers of the knights rose like the rumble of an earthquake, Inglis recognized Rafinha’s voice calling out to her from farther away.

“Chriiis! You did it! I knew you could! Thank you so much!”

Rafinha was beaming. She was practically glowing, suddenly free of anxiety. It was adorable. It was as if all her hardships had been swept away. Yua rode next to her, as indifferent and seemingly bored as always.

The battle itself had truly been an experience, and Rafinha was happy, so there was nothing more to say. Inglis waved with a smile. “There are still enemies left, so be careful!”

Her words were meant for Rafinha, but they immediately came back to haunt her herself.

Vvvvooooon...

A strange noise and tremor suddenly came from behind her.

“Wh—?!” Inglis gasped.

When she turned around, the Prismer’s lower body was glowing and writhing, emitting a strange noise.

“Ah...! It’s still alive?!”

It wasn’t only the Prismer’s lower body that had changed. A bluish *something* cut across her field of vision.

“What’s that?!”

There were chunks of ice strewn across the battlefield, each sealing away a humanoid magicite beast. Now, they flew toward the Prismer, smashing into it and disappearing. As what had been the Prismer writhed, its shape began to change into an unrecognizable, prismatic clump.

“Is it trying to revive by absorbing the magicite beasts?!” *Then I need to wipe it out before it gets the chance!*

Inglis didn’t know exactly how the magicite beasts had gotten frozen to begin with, but she knew *why* they were. She’d seen it before, in Nova, when Cyrene had transformed into a magicite beast. And just maybe, someone else who knew what had happened there had suggested encasing magicite beasts in ice. It was important for her to keep that in mind, but things were not looking good this time.

“Eeeeeek!”

“Ngh!”

She heard cries. Looking up, Inglis saw the *Star Princess*, carrying

Rafinha and Yua, being drawn toward the Prismer.

“Rani! Yua!”

None of the other Flygears were being drawn in, so why was the *Star Princess*?

It was because of something Yua cradled in her hand. A block of ice—and inside, a tiny magicite beast. As far as Inglis knew, only the black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front had the skill to accomplish such a thing.

That meant he was likely present.

Yua was gripping that ice desperately, refusing to let it go, and the Prismer was pulling it—as well as the Flygear they were on—toward itself. Inglis needed to act.

“Haaah!” Inglis leaped toward the *Star Princess* and pulled it down to earth through brute force. Then, to prevent it from being drawn to the Prismer, she planted her legs and held it in place.

“Chris! Thanks! You saved us!” Rafinha said.

“Sure!”

“Thanks, Boobies,” Yua chimed in. “I felt like my arms were getting pulled from their sockets.” It had been a long time since Inglis had heard that nickname. Yua was still very...Yua.

“Aha ha ha... Anyway, Yua, what’s that?! It seems like the Prismer’s trying to pull it in.” Inglis looked at the block of ice in her upperclassman’s hands.

“It’s Beanpole, and I won’t get rid of him even if you tell me to.” Yua looked far more serious than usual. No, probably more serious than Inglis had ever seen her.

Inglis rested her hand over the ice. “I would never tell you that! I’m going to help you!”

Rafinha’s hand stretched toward it as well. “Me too! Mm-hmm!”

Yua seemed surprised. “Maybe you two are nicer than I thought...”

“I don’t think that should be surprising!”

“What gave you that impression?!”

“Well, one of you just snaps sometimes, and the other’s always trying to beat me up.” Yua looked back and forth between Rafinha and Inglis.

“Well, that’s upsetting!” the two protested in unison.

“Then please... Take care of Beanpole for a little while.” Yua passed them the block of ice before she turned toward the Prismer.

“Yua...?” Rafinha began.

“What are you going to do?!” Inglis asked.

“Give it a beating. I’m in my rebellious phase.”

Inglis didn’t completely understand what Yua meant by that.

Yua turned a sharp gaze toward the writhing Prismer. She held

both hands up as finger guns and brought them together, which would make them fire a single, more intense shot. She planted her feet firmly, readying herself. At some point during this, ears and a tail like Ripple's appeared on her, and they swayed, shimmering with a faint rainbow light. And then, in front of her fingertips appeared a bullet of light that swelled as Inglis watched.

"Wow, Yua! That looks like something Chris would do!" Rafinha exclaimed.

"I'd love to have another sparring match with you!" Inglis added.

"Stop saying silly things and take care of Beanpole."

I was being completely serious, Inglis thought. Anyway, that light she created is something big. Its size, the power I sense from it... It's on a level with my Aether Strike. In fact, it might surpass that.

Thinking about the amount of aether she could focus, Inglis knew that an Aether Strike couldn't embody one hundred percent of it. Maybe twenty or thirty percent at most. To use all of her power in one blow, she had to rely on a weapon like her dragonscale sword. It was possible for her to do combos like Aether Breaker to increase the destructive power of Aether Strike, but leaving those aside, that was the most she could do unaided. It was worth watching an attack more powerful.

"Super big bang!"

Blammmmmmm!

Inglis cringed. *What a dumb name...*

Yua's blast of light carved a trail as it rushed toward the Prismer and hit it dead center. Light flashed out like an explosion, covering the surrounding area.

"Did it work?!" Rafinha asked, squinting against the blinding glare.

Inglis couldn't immediately answer. She still sensed the energy of the Prismer. It was still writhing. It was hard to see, but it may have taken on a more concrete shape.

"Chris! What happened?!"

"I don't know if that worked!"

Rather than being obliterated, it may have gained strength. Was it from the many magicite beasts it was absorbing? Or from absorbing Yua's attack?

Yua's power seemed to be partially infused with the power of a magicite beast—rather, of a Prismer. Specifically, the demihuman larval Prismer she had fought before. Inglis surmised that was why Yua got demihuman ears and a tail when she wielded that power.

Using that premature Prismer's power was fine enough. Despite its

source, Inglis saw no problem with Yua using it for her own ends—in fact, Inglis was pleased as long as it made her a stronger foe. She certainly wasn't going to complain about another powerful sparring partner.

But since it was a Prismer's power, was this Prismer able to absorb it? Even Prismers were different from one to the next and didn't contain precisely the same properties. Additionally, while the larval Prismer's power had become part of Yua, she'd had something else to begin with.

Or had Yua attacked the Prismer before Inglis had arrived, allowing it to gain resistance to her attacks?

The reasons for what Inglis was observing were unknown, but the result was clear. The Prismer stopped drawing in the humanoid magicite beasts. The chunks of ice not yet absorbed crumbled and fell. They had succeeded in protecting the chunk that held Morris.

"It stopped! Is it over?!" Rafinha asked.

"Yeah, this one's fine!" Inglis replied. "But—"

When the light subsided, the Prismer's new form was revealed. Its shape was completely different from before Inglis had blown its upper body away. Its head was the same: that of a powerful, majestic giant bird. It kept its wings as well. But as for the rest of it—its arms, its legs, its torso—it had taken on a humanoid shape. Its size was a fraction of that which it had been before. It was still perhaps three times taller than Inglis herself, but it was nonetheless far smaller now. However, the intimidating power she sensed condensed within it was far greater.

Chapter VI: Inglis, Age 15—Battle with the Prismers (4)

“What is that?! It’s completely different from before!” Rafinha said, astonished.

“Evolving into a human form, huh?” Inglis laughed. “The world is just full of wonders, isn’t it?” A mature Prismer evolving further was something she hadn’t expected at all. She had to hand it to the beast. It was wonderful. Even old King Inglis had never seen such a monster.

“B-But—! Are you going to be okay? You can handle this, right, Chris?”

Inglis answered honestly. “I don’t know. I can’t promise that.”

“Huh?! That’s so unlike you!” Rafinha suddenly looked very uneasy.

“Either way...I sure am hyped for it!” Inglis clenched her fist and grinned.

“Are you sure this is the time for that?!” Rafinha objected, but a faint smile returned to her face, as if Inglis’s gung ho attitude had relieved her somewhat.

“Gotta do what you love, right? You only live once. Yua, take care of Rani. Things are going to get dangerous here.”

“Nope. Can’t,” Yua flatly refused.

That was when Inglis noticed rainbow-colored tendrils wrapping around Yua as she fidgeted.

Rafinha and Inglis stared, perplexed. “Yua...?”

“What are you doing?”

“Something’s growing... Mm, mmm... Nope. Can’t move.” Yua was straining against the tendrils.

“Okay, then. Rani, take Yua and get out of here.”

Just as they loaded Yua aboard the *Star Princess*, though, someone screamed.

“Aaah!” The noise came from a nearby Flygear. The knight aboard screamed in pain and transformed into a magicite beast before their very eyes.

Inglis gasped. The Prismers’ influence had taken root not with an attack, but simply by being in the beast’s presence. It was proof the Prismers had grown stronger. But most importantly—

“Rani! It’s dangerous! Hurry!”

Rafinha wasn’t safe here. Inglis herself was protected thanks to

her manipulation of aether. There were many things she didn't know about Yua, but she knew one thing for certain: the girl was something exceptional. But Rafinha... Inglis didn't know what kind of Rune the fallen knight had possessed. However, since the knight had been farther away from the Prismers than they were, and Rafinha was still fine, it must have been middle-class or lower. That led Inglis to believe the strength of the Rune aided in resistance to the Prismers' influence—but she had no way of knowing how long that resistance would hold out.

A chill ran down Inglis's spine, shouting at her that it was too dangerous for Rafinha. *I need to get her somewhere safe as fast as possible!*

"Okay...!" Rafinha tried to start the *Star Princess* back up, but its normally vivacious engine stayed silent. "It's not starting! Did it break down?!"

When it was being sucked in by the Prismers, did I use too much force dragging it down? Inglis thought. *In any case, this is terrible timing.* "Then how about—" She stopped, sensing something behind her. The Prismers had suddenly closed the gap between them and was about to swing its fist down.

"Ugh...! You're so impatient!" Inglis stopped its massive fist with her dragonscale sword.

Claaaang!

Sound rang out from a blow strong enough to make the blade creak. As she blocked, the ground around Inglis's feet cracked and her feet sank down. "Rani, run! Take Yua with you!"

"Okay!" Rafinha went to pick up Yua, but before she could, a voice rang from above.

"You're too slow. You won't make it in time." Long red hair fluttered in the wind.

"Sistia?!" Inglis gasped. *So they are here!*

"Leave it to me." As Sistia spoke, she easily picked up Rafinha and Yua.

"Eeek!"

"You're strong, lady," Yua said.

"My name is Sistia. You would do best to remember that."

Inglis trusted Sistia to get the two to safety. "Thank you for your assistance!"

"Hmph. I have no intention of fighting by your side. In fact, it'd be better for us if you both fell here." Sistia leaped high and made her exit.

There was no more need to hold back. "Dragon Lore!" A

translucent white sword and copy of Inglis's arm appeared, striking the inner part of the Prismer's arm as it bore down. This deflected the force of the Prismer's blow, throwing it off-balance. The pressure on Inglis suddenly ceased.

"Now!" *I can't let this chance pass me by!* Honestly, she couldn't give any ground at all. She'd put most of her aether into that Aether Cross Lore and sent it flying. She didn't have enough in her for even a single Aether Strike. Her hands were full just maintaining Aether Shell.

Her dragon lore was at its limits too, but she'd needed it to deflect that last attack. Aether Shell wouldn't have left her unscathed from a punch that strong. If she'd flinched even a little, she would have been crushed.

Inglis hadn't been able to push back against the Prismer—only throw it off-balance with dragon lore. It had made the beast more resistant to dragon lore, but she'd had no other choice.

In a situation like this, the only way to attack is to find a foe's weak point and pierce it! Inglis ran up the Prismer's arm, close to its face. At that moment, the color of the Aether Shell surrounding her body changed—as did the glow of the dragonscale sword. This was the result of aether. Just like she did when using Aether Reflector, she had changed the wavelength of her aether.

The wavelength of aether was equivalent to the element of Gifts or magic. Changing it was like attacking the Prismer with fire once it had become resistant to ice. However, the manipulation of aether wavelengths was technically fraught. Inglis was unable to find many stable states.

So, I've got to use limited methods to the greatest effect! "Right there!" She thrust her sword toward the Prismer's right eye.

Vwoooooosh!

But just before it struck, a beam of light shot forth from the eye. "Huh?!" *Did it lure me in?!* Even before it took its half-man, half-bird form, Inglis had noticed the Prismer's tactical aptitude. It was something that separated the Prismer from normal magicite beasts.

She took the shot on the blade of her sword, unable to dodge in time. She faltered, her abrupt attempt to brace herself having failed, and was sent flying backward.

"Not bad!" Being caught off guard and put at a disadvantage was also part of battle. It might be inconvenient, it might be painful, but surpassing such a test was the best way to grow.

Inglis was still soaring backward toward the defensive walls of the city. Hitting them would spell disaster for her. As she struggled to

regain her balance in midair, the force pushing on her suddenly weakened. “Wh—?!”

No, it was the other way around: someone was supporting her. She saw the black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front. Of course—if Sistia was present, he was likely to be nearby.

Inglis pouted. “I’d appreciate it if you stayed out of this,” Inglis complained to the man.

“Mm. Very well, then.” He took his hand off Inglis’s back. However, thanks to the weakened momentum, Inglis was able to get her feet on the ground. This time, she held her footing against the ray of light. But soon, another one came from the Prismers’ left eye.

“Huh?!” Under the doubled intensity, she was pushed back. As her feet dug into the ground, steadily being pushed backward, he followed her at the same pace.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“My work here isn’t finished yet.”

Regardless, he seemed to be respecting her request to stay out of this fight. Quite conscientiously, in fact.

Despite the situation, Inglis couldn’t help but giggle. “And what work might that be?”

“Well, you’re too exhausted to fight that evolved Prismers, are you not? That would hardly be right. A battle is much more enjoyable if it’s a fair and even match, don’t you agree?”

“Well, true. But what are you going to do about that?”

The black-masked man extended his hand to Inglis. “I grant you my aether. I too have exerted myself, so I will not be giving you all of it—I must avoid being too conspicuous in my interference.”

“So you just want to foist the glory on me?”

“Is glory not what the lieutenant colonel of the Royal Guard seeks?”

Apparently, he had heard Inglis’s announcement to her allied knights. And he was right. Glory was not something someone could avoid in taking on a Prismers one-on-one amidst a crowded battlefield, nor had she had any plans of doing so.

That’s why she had accepted the commission in the first place. If some nameless academy student took down a Prismers, the only question on people’s lips would be what the Paladins, the holy knight himself, and the hial menaces had been doing in the meantime. In situations like these, the lower the prestige of the ones who claimed glory and the higher the prestige of the ones who had it snatched from beneath them, the more the reputation of those who were outdone would suffer. If someone from a low background were to take the wind out of the brass’s sails, it would be grasped as a dangerously thrilling story of revolt.

And Inglis didn't want that. She didn't want Rafael's position to weaken, nor did she want the expectations which would be thrust upon her if he were humbled. And, most importantly—it would be a terrible loss for her to miss the opportunity to be invited back the next time there was a Prismers.

She didn't expect Eris or Ripple to have any such intentions, but their word only carried so far. Those two and Rafael formed the heart of the Paladins, but above them were Prince Wayne and Ambassador Theodore, who each moved in their own circles and had their own positions to consider.

From that perspective, if the colonel of the Royal Guard were to assist the colonel of the Paladins in the Prismers' defeat, there would be no such thrilling insubordination—simply two leaders of equal caliber joining forces. As a result, any impact on the Paladins' reputation would be minimal, and Inglis would be called on again to fight future Prismers.

"I decided this arrangement would be the most convenient in the end."

"I'm in agreement. I have no intent of letting word of our participation leak out, and seeding chaos across this land. Our only enemy is the Highlanders, who would devour this earth."

When an organization gains fame for its deeds, people naturally applaud it and place their hopes in it. For an organization like the Steelblood Front, this would surely be taken as a challenge to the existing social order. While their existence had been clear for some time, there had been no organized effort to cut them down to size. But if their fame were to swell, even if unplanned, the risk of such a purge would become more intense.

The black-masked man claimed that he sought not rule of the surface, but only the defeat of Highland. He had said as much the first time he and Inglis had met, in fact.

But with the Prismers on the move and Karelia itself in danger, he had been unable to refrain from action. Not to mention, there were those among the Karelian authorities—like Mimosa in Nova, who had administered the prism powder to Cyrene—who aligned themselves with the Steelbloods. It was only natural that he'd take action to defend his own.

"You say the same thing whenever we meet," Inglis noted.

"I'm a man of strong convictions. And are not yours just as strong? Or is there another reason you're content to be shoved around like this?" As they spoke, Inglis was still leaving ruts as she was pushed back, and the black-masked man kept up neatly.

Inglis laughed appreciatively. "You're not wrong. I suppose I'll tell you. An army marches on its stomach—I consider this my pre-battle

meal.” She wanted to test her strength at full power against a rare enemy such as this. That was, after all, a warrior’s instinct.

“Then...” The black-masked man laid his hand on Inglis’s shoulder. The wavelength of the aether surrounding him, and its color as well, changed to match Inglis’s, and she felt it permeate her body. Her lost aether suddenly filled back up. In an instant, she was at almost full strength.

The Steelbloods’ leader had said that he was exhausted as well, but Inglis found that intriguing considering how “little” of his aether had put her in nearly perfect condition. Thus, she could deduce that he harbored more aether than she did. One’s raw amount of aether—endurance alone—was not decisive in a battle. The black-masked man had said himself that, at full power, she could bring far more destructive power to bear. But it still reminded her that she was still learning. It was good to have a rival to set her sights on. It would give her even more motivation to train.

“Mm. That should be enough.” The aether flow from the black-masked man faded.

“That was incredible! You said you were exhausted as well, but I’m pretty much back to full.”

“Do not expect too much. I am nearly at my limit. Expect that there will be no next time.”

“Yes, I understand. You have my deepest thanks! Someday, on another battlefield, I’ll repay you.”

“Mm. Then, just once, if we meet again on the battlefield, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t attack me.”

“Huh?! But—” *But that would be boring.* Inglis had wanted to use the opportunity to keep training and someday thank him by showing what she’d learned.

“Anyway, I leave the rest to you. I wish you luck!” The black-masked man turned and leaped. He distanced himself rapidly. Inglis had wanted to discuss a few more things with him, but given the circumstances, she had to let him go. Right now, she needed to deal with the Prismers.

More specifically, she needed to immediately deal with those beams of light pressing her back. That was why she had accepted her rival’s power!

“Aether Strike!” A massive blast of aether formed in front of Inglis.

Boooooooooom!

It began to push the Prismers’ beams away from her.

“All right!” Inglis, freed from that pressure, chased closely behind

the advancing Aether Strike. *I can push on!*

The town of Ahlemin lay behind her. Not everyone had evacuated to the tunnels yet, and the battle against the countless magicite beasts continued. If the Prismer's attack had struck there, who knows how many people would have been hurt.

But Inglis wasn't going to let that happen! She was going to push back the Prismer!

It wasn't going to let that happen easily, though. Along with both its eyes, now both its hands fired beams of light as well. The Aether Strike was being forced back toward Inglis and the city once more.

"It's overpowering my Aether Strike? Interesting!" The strengthened form of an already-mature Prismer after it evolved was not to be trifled with. It defied imagination. To think that something could so easily push back an Aether Strike...

"But how about this?!"

She adjusted the wavelength of her Aether Shell to that of Aether Strike's opposite—that which would repel it. It was just like Aether Reflector, where she could reflect Aether Strike and control its new path. "Haaaaah!"

Blammmmmmm!

Inglis's dragonscale sword swatted back the Aether Strike. The force of her swing combined with the repulsive effect of the wavelength of the aether infusing it sent the blast back toward the Prismer, but only for a time.

She followed after it while it still moved; when it stopped, she swung again. Each time, it would again advance toward the Prismer and then stop.

Advance again. Swing again when it stops.

And again. And again. And again!

If Aether Strike itself wasn't enough, she could add more power by other means. Inglis made up the distance she'd been pushed back, and closed into melee range with the Prismer. There, the Aether Strike which had exhausted her power fully canceled out the Prismer's light beams. They all disappeared.

"Ah—!" Inglis immediately changed the trajectory of the swing she'd wound up to propel the Aether Strike. Instead, her blade plunged into the ground. The shock opened a pit and kicked up a cloud of dust. A smoke screen—a distraction.

Leaping from the cloud of dust, Inglis ran around the Prismer's right, toward its back. With the town behind her, she couldn't avoid the Prismer's shots. Any misses would cause so much damage there that she wouldn't be able to bear to see it.

She'd had no option of simply evading in that situation; she'd had only the choice of bearing the brunt of the blow or finding a way to repel it. Her solution instead was to first stop the attack before she could do anything more.

Of course, she was doing this at full speed with Aether Shell active, but before she could fully move behind the Prismer, it looked her in the eye.

It was aiming; an attack was imminent. A beam of light fired from its eye toward Inglis.

"I see...! Your reaction speed has increased too!" Before its further evolution, it had always been a step behind Inglis. But now, even at her full speed, it could chase her with its eyes. Not only that, there was a beam ahead of her—an attack fired from its wingtips—as if the Prismer was trying to wall her off.

She evaded it, but only barely, thanks to her rapid adjustments. Without stopping, she ran the tip of her sword along the ground, which kicked up a cloud of dust that concealed her. That would keep the Prismer from being able to see her twists and turns. If she stopped for even a moment or let the Prismer realize where she was going, she'd take a direct hit that she couldn't just shrug off.

In fact, the beams were flying far and wide, some leaving gigantic furrows in the ground and others blowing away entire hills and mountaintops. The destruction was tremendous. This was a skin-of-the-teeth battle where Inglis was constantly dodging at the last second!

"Ha ha ha... This is tension on an entirely new level," Inglis muttered without thinking. She couldn't see what her face looked like right now, but she was sure it carried an incredibly graceful smile, like a blooming flower.

As she did, she waited for the situation to change.

If she continued to evade, the Prismer would eventually become impatient and commit to something. It would use the cage of light it had before its transformation, or something like it, to limit her movement—and that would be her chance. If she had nowhere to escape, neither would it. Her own attack would take most of her aether, so she needed to be sure she wouldn't miss.

Wait for an opportunity, strike as hard as I can—until then, this is a test of who blinks first.

But the end of the back-and-forth came in an unexpected fashion: the Prismer suddenly stopped attacking. Inglis expected the cage of light, but nothing happened—it simply stopped in place.

"Hmm?" Keeping her legs moving in case she needed to suddenly dodge, she eyed the Prismer warily.

"NO...MOVE..."

“Wh—?! Human speech?!” When the Prismer had absorbed humanoid magicite beasts and taken human shape, had it also learned human words? Perhaps this was also a reflection of its learning ability.

The Prismer thrust its large hand forth—not at Inglis, but in the direction of Ahlemin.

“OR...ELSE...”

Light gathered in its palm. The entire town of Ahlemin had become its hostage.

Inglis had expected the Prismer to try to stop her somehow, but not like this. It truly was full of surprises—but this was unfortunate. This wasn’t what Inglis wanted at all. She wanted something more akin to the ultimate magicite beast.

She couldn’t hold back her disappointment. “It seems by becoming closer to human, you’ve also acquired human wile. And that’s too bad. A magicite beast should be a destroyer, attacking anything which moves by instinct alone! Come on, remember your pride as a magicite beast!”

“GONE...ALWAYS...ONLY...SEARCH...”

“Searching? For what?!”

“SHARD. PRECIOUS!” With Inglis stopped, the Prismer grabbed her tightly, its grip threatening to crush her.

“Nnngh!” Even with Aether Shell active, the pressure was tremendous. If she didn’t do anything, she’d surely be killed. The sharp pain shot through her. Her bones creaked, and somewhere she felt them about to snap.

“INTERFERING...DIE!”

“No thanks!”

I’ve put all my aether into my dragonscale sword! You shouldn’t rely on cheap tricks—they can turn on you! Now that I’ve stopped, you got too close all on your own!

And you never said not to counterattack!

“AH?”

As Inglis unleashed her power, the clump of aether which had swelled up in her sword pushed the Prismer’s hand away. Its wavelength and color were, of course, the type she’d used for rebounding, which the Prismer had not yet built up a resistance to.

Its crushing grip loosened, and she crashed to the ground. Her limbs ached all over, but she had no time to worry about that. She faced the Prismer as it kept trying to bat the aether away.

“Dragon Lore! Haaaaaaaah!”

She struck with all her might!

“AHH?!”

A burst of brilliant light filled Inglis’s vision. The explosion of Aether Cross Lore at close range pushed her back even more intensely

than the previous time. As she was smashed into the ground and rolled away, she saw a pillar of light in the corner of her vision. The Prismer was surely caught within.

But then the ground collapsed, and the cloud of dust rushing upward obscured her sight. “U-Ugh... How about—”

Before she could finish speaking, a gigantic foot stretched out from the cloud of dust, its momentum whistling through the air. It was, of course, the Prismer’s.

“Ngh!”

Clang!

Somehow, Inglis managed to move her dragonscale sword into its path and avoid a direct hit. But due to her wounds, she couldn’t keep her footing. Inevitably, she was sent flying, at the speed of a bullet, toward the walls of Ahlemin.

“This...isn’t good...” Managing to regain her composure in the air, she thrust her sword toward the ground to try to slow herself, but even that wasn’t enough.

If I keep going, I’m going to slam into the wall! Deeper! If I can plunge the sword deeper, I can stop!

Krsshhhhh!

However, her trusty dragonscale blade, unable to handle the stresses, shattered. “Wh—?! Fufailbane, I’m sorry, but I seem to have ruined your kind gift!”

This was bad timing. Terrible timing. Still, the sword had held up well, all considered. Of the weapons she’d had the chance to try, it had outstanding performance and strength. It was especially significant as one which could act as a vessel for all her aether. Thanks to that, it made the use of Aether Cross Lore, an attack even more destructive than Aether Breaker, practically viable. Without the dragonscale sword, that technique would not have been possible.

But anyway, the situation’s gotten worse. What do I—

“Chris!” Rafinha’s voice rang out from behind her.

“Rani?!”

Near the walls, Rafinha stood in Inglis’s path.

Is she going to try to catch me? But if she gets dragged into this, she’ll be in even more danger than I am now. “Don’t! Rani, get out of here!”

“No! I’m going to help you!” Rafinha’s expression intensified as she loosed arrows from Shiny Flow. The countless arrows converged and fell en masse into Inglis’s trajectory. Striking down, they raised clouds of dirt acting as sandbags to support her back, but Inglis’s

momentum blew through them. Rafinha tried again and again—as many times as she needed to. Bit by bit, they slowed Inglis’s flight.

“Hyaaaah!” As Inglis closed in, Rafinha herself leaped into her path, trying to stop her somehow.

“R-Rani!” Inglis gasped. Her strength was honestly not enough to accomplish it. The strength the black-masked man had used to support Inglis had been many times stronger, and the impulse propelling Inglis now was many times stronger than it had been then. Tens of times. Hundreds of times. Maybe infinitely.

“Grrrrrr!” Taking Rafinha’s embrace, Inglis forcefully planted her feet on the ground and slowed to a halt. Her legs had already hurt, but now they were probably broken. But her own scream cut through the pain. Saving Rafinha was all she was focused on. Her will somehow won out, and the two managed to not smash into the wall. Her back merely thumped against it, perfectly to lean back and rest. “Phew! Rani, are you okay?!”

“Y-Yeah! Sorry I couldn’t get you to stop.”

“No, you did great! You saved me—ngh!” Inglis suddenly winced as pain wracked through her.

“Ah! Don’t move! I’ll heal you.” Rafinha activated her healing Gift, and touched Inglis, nearly in an embrace. Inglis’s pain faded, and she could tell her wounds were healing. She must have been imagining things, but it even felt like she recovered a little bit of her aether. Perhaps Rafinha’s devotion had filled her heart.

Inglis had never been seriously wounded in front of Rafinha before, and thus she had never been healed by her. This was a new experience for her, and one that was very soothing—but she had no time to sit back and enjoy it. The Prismer was still alive. Its right arm and fist were blown off, and it was generally beaten up otherwise, but it was still alive.

It had stopped, but its body was glowing brightly despite its wounds—in fact, it was shining even brighter. The air trembled with a high-pitched buzz. The ground beneath Inglis’s feet wobbled. Had the Prismer come to regret its facile attempt to outwit her and instead decided to blow her away with all its might? Inglis didn’t know what form such an attack would take, but she was sure it would wreak havoc. It might destroy *the entire* town of Ahlemin. She sensed the Prismer’s growing power. If Inglis was going to stop it, now was the time.

But first she needed to get Rafinha to safety. She was too close to the Prismer and was in danger of being turned into a magicite beast. “Rani, you need to get out of here! The Prismer’s going to attack!”

“What are you talking about?! You can’t fight like this! I need to hold out and help you for as long as I can!”

“That moment’s already come and gone! Please, don’t be stubborn!”

“I don’t care if I’m being stubborn!” Rafinha shouted her insistence and looked Inglis straight in the eyes. “Even if I *am* being stubborn, I want to be with you to the very end! That’s only proper for a knight and her squire!”

“Rani...”

Rafinha understood the danger, and that’s why she didn’t want to leave on her own. Inglis felt partly apologetic, partly pitying. Inglis was the reason Rafinha was acting this way. The squire felt nothing but shame at her own weakness and inexperience, but there was nothing to be done about it now.

“No! This isn’t over yet!” The voice which called out belonged to someone else. It was a young man’s, dignified and powerful but with tenderness in its timbre. Clad in crimson armor, he settled to the ground in front of Inglis and Rafinha.

“Rafael!”

Rafael turned to them while watching the Prismers’s movements. “Leave this to me. Thank you. You’ve done enough. You’ve fought well.” His expression was one of calm determination. “Chris, you’ve wounded the Prismers significantly. Thanks to that, we can finish it off!”

Two others landed next to Rafael. They were, of course, the holy knight’s counterparts: the hial menaces. Eris and Ripple shared Rafael’s expression. It was clear that they had completely accepted what was to come.

Eris praised Inglis without any reservations. “Honestly, I’m truly impressed that you managed to wear it down this far. It’s stronger than any Prismers we’ve ever seen—unbelievably so. You really are something special... I’m glad you’re here.”

“Yeah, yeah. It would’ve been super tough if we had to fight that from the start. Thanks so much! Leave the rest to us, and get some rest.” Ripple didn’t seem that different from normal, but Inglis could just make out the tremor in her voice.

“Lady Eris, Lady Ripple, let’s go! Show me your true power!” Rafael called out intently.

“Yes! Let our hearts be as one, and our power be yours!” Eris said.

“Yeah! Please, Rafael! Save the surface, this country, and everyone here!” Ripple agreed.

“Yes! Leave it to me!”

Eris and Ripple’s forms were surrounded by a golden glow, noble, beautiful, and sublime. The kind of glow that produces instinctive awe in all who see.

“Rafael...” Rafinha clutched Inglis’s arm, unable to do anything

but whisper her brother's name. She could find no other words to say, but her feelings were clear from the tears welling up in her eyes.

Rafael looked back at her with a smile. "Rani... Get along well with Chris. I'm going to protect your future, so...give my regards to mother and father."

"I will! I swear!" Tears fell from Rafinha's eyes. She couldn't hold them back any longer.

"Chris..." Rafael turned a soft, warm expression at Inglis as well.

"Yes, cousin?"

"Somewhere inside me, I've always felt like I was trying to catch up with you. Even though I have a special-class Rune, you've always been more incredible than I could imagine... I remember when you were just a newborn and defeated a magicite beast that I couldn't."

"You...remember that?"

"Yes. For a long time, I thought I'd only dreamed it, but seeing you fight, I know it really happened. I know you'll surpass me. It's like a source of pride for me to protect you now... Take good care of Rani. I know she'll be safe with you."

"Yes," Inglis agreed. "As she has been, as she will be..." With a graceful smile on her face, she strode toward Rafael.

"Chris?"

"Cousin, I too will do what I can..." She looked up at him...and brought her hand up to softly brush his cheek.

"Ch-Chris?!"

"At least let me give you a blessing before battle... Could you close your eyes?"

"Huh?! Ah, uh, o-okay!"

Full of nervous energy, Rafael flitted his eyelids shut...

Inglis stared at Rafael...just before she dipped down into a boxer's crouch, clenched a fist, and—*pow!* She socked him square in the gut.

"Gah...?!" Rafael's feet lifted up off the ground for a moment as he bent double and then slumped to the ground with a thud, unconscious.

"Huh?!" Rafinha, Eris, and Ripple couldn't believe their eyes. Their eyes about to pop out of their heads, they stared at Rafael's fallen form.

"I'm sorry, Rafael... I didn't think there was time to explain." Inglis bowed deeply to him. To be sure of a one-punch knockout, she'd needed him to be completely defenseless. She'd even had to lead him on a little bit with her feminine wiles.

Or, put the other way around, she'd knowingly taken advantage of him a little bit with her feminine wiles. The idea had come naturally. It embarrassed her a bit in more ways than one, and she blushed a little.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wha-Wha-Wha... What is *wrong* with you?!” Eris was the first of the three to come to her senses, looking more out of sorts than Inglis had ever seen her. Her voice, always steady and controlled, had shrunk to nearly an inaudible whisper, albeit a panicked one. “Don’t you understand the situation we’re in?! Without Rafael, who will wield us to defeat that Prismer?! Aaaaagh... You fool! What do we do now?!” She grabbed Inglis by the collar and shook her.

“Rafael! Rafael! Get up! Get up, pleeease!” Ripple called out. “It’s no good, he’s out cold! Rafinha, can you use your healing Gift on Rafael? We need to get him up—quick!” She tried to get Rafinha to help wake Rafael up.

“Y-Yes! Understood!”

“Wait, Rani!” Inglis stopped her. If Rafael got up, her efforts to stop him would have been in vain. “Eris, Ripple, I have a reason for doing this—and I have a plan.”

“A plan? You had better! Tell us quickly! There’s no time!” Eris demanded.

“Inglis... What do we do?!” Ripple asked.

“I will wield you. Lend me your power.” Inglis smiled serenely.

“Wha—?!” they both blurted out. Their upset expressions became calm and somber at once. If Inglis was taking Rafael’s place as their wielder, that meant she was also taking on his duty of sacrifice.

Pained, Eris cast her eyes downward. “I know it’s too late to say so...but I don’t think it’s fair that you take Rafael’s place. If sacrifice is unavoidable, then he should... He, who has always accepted his duty and his fate, should be the one...”

“Inglis...I agree with Eris. But... Yeah, at this point...”

“No, that’s not what’s happening here,” Inglis said.

“Eh?” the two hial menaces gasped, sharing the same expression.

“I won’t die even if I wield a hial menace.” Inglis smiled again.

“Huuuuh?!” Their doubt quickly overcame their shock.

“You don’t have to lie for our sake...” Eris said.

“Yeah,” Ripple agreed. “We’ll handle it somehow...”

“No, it’s true,” Inglis insisted. “I’ve already gotten some practice in. Right, Rani?”

At Inglis’s call, a light bulb came on in Rafinha’s mind. “Oh, right! I-I remember! She’s telling the truth! When we went to Alcard, we fought a hial menace called Tiffanyer, and when she turned into armor, Inglis put her on! But she’s still here, alive and well!”

“Tiffanyer?! *She* was there?!” Eris gasped.

“You know her, Eris?!”

“Yes. From a long time back. A long, *long* time back...”

Inglis described their battle. “When we fought, Tiffanyer even

transformed herself into armor and girded herself onto me, trying to kill me. But thanks to that, I learned how to avoid the hial menaces' curse while wielding their power." Proper use of aether made certain processes of a hial menace malfunction.

A transformed hial menace drained their wielder's life force and then dispersed it outward. However, to use a metaphor, the hole from which one's life force was drained could be blocked with aether, allowing Inglis to ignore that consequence and simply use the hial menace's great power for free, in a sense.

When the Steelblood Front's black-masked leader had "killed" Evel, he had wielded Sistia without noticeable problems. Witnessing that had set Inglis's mind to working out how he'd managed such a feat. Thanks to that, when Tiffanyer had equipped herself to Inglis, she'd been able to quickly put such countermeasures into action before she lost her life.

"I can't know for myself whether that really occurred, but if it did, Tiffanyer definitely wouldn't have been holding back," Eris mused.

"Inglis... If that's true, you must have..." Ripple began.

As the hial menaces wavered, Inglis knew she had to persuade them. "Eris, Ripple... I don't think I could ever truly understand how much you've suffered, but I know it must have hurt you deeply. Fighting at a person's side, getting to know them, and having them torn away...over and over... I don't think I could endure such a thing. I can't even imagine losing Rani."

Eris and Ripple were both experienced hial menaces. They must have, at one time, fallen for their wielder, just as Arles had fallen for Rochefort. But as death separated them from lovers and trusted companions alike, both must have eventually taken a resigned outlook on their duties. While they looked the same age as Arles, who still retained a childish innocence, Eris and Ripple gave completely different impressions. That they had long years of experience was obvious. And through all this, they continued to protect Karelia and its people as hial menaces.

Inglis found that admirable. No matter how unbreakable and eternal their bodies were, their hearts could be shattered—yet they remained unbroken, unyielding, devoted to protecting the people of the surface. Hial menaces were the guardians of humanity, and those two, in their way of living and their very selves, embodied this to the utmost. It was something Inglis knew that she could never and would never do, but she respected it. It deserved respect. King Inglis had lived a long life devoted to duty and was now reborn to have some fun, but Eris and Ripple must have lived even longer lives, bearing their duties the whole time.

"I offer my utmost respect and gratitude for all you have done as

hierarchical menaces.” Inglis again bowed deeply. As she rose, she smiled and extended her hand. “You’ve worked hard all this time. Isn’t it time to have some fun? As long as I’m with you, there’s no need to worry. No need for sorrow, no need to hurt. I’ll prove it to you, so don’t worry. Take my hand. I will protect Rani. I will protect Rafael. And I will protect your hearts.”

Plip...

A tear fell, and it wasn’t from Rafinha, who had already been crying.

“Eris?!” Ripple gasped.



“Ah...?! S-Sorry! I... I’m not even fighting yet, but...!” Eris wiped her eyes in a fluster, and turned away, embarrassed.

“Sheesh. You get so emotional sometimes... But I understand. I’m about to cry too.”

Ripple also wiped her eyes before she took Inglis’s hand. “Inglis, I guess I’m leaving it up to you! Let’s do this, okay?!”

“Yes, Ripple! Leave it to me!” As Inglis held Ripple’s hand, the demihuman began glowing golden, before letting off an intense pillar of light, which concealed her within. Inside, Ripple took on a new form.

“You too, Eris,” Inglis prompted.

“Yes,” Eris replied. “I leave it to you! Please, protect...protect everyone!” Eris kept her head low, embarrassed to have been seen crying, but she firmly grasped Inglis’s hands with both of her own. Just like Ripple, a golden light embraced her, and she transformed.

“That light was amazing! Chris, are you okay?!”

“Don’t worry, Rani. Take care of Rafael.”

“Got it! We’ll be fine here, so do your thing, Chris!”

“Of course! It’s not every day you get a chance like this, right!” Inglis smiled, a pair of golden-sheathed swords resting on her hips—they were Eris transformed. Their glittering, elegant design befitted a hial menace. Tucked into the small of her back was an equally beautiful double-barreled gun that was Ripple.

Inglis unsheathed the blades and looked at them. They glimmered beautifully, like the stars, and when she swung them lightly, they left trails of light in the air. Faint as the trails were, the intense force behind them was palpable. “Amazing. So this is the true form of a hial menace!”

Grasping them in her hands, Inglis could tell the difference. Ordinary Artifacts—or even the blade made of the ancient Fufailbane’s scales—were like toys compared to this. The dragonscale sword had been a fitting vessel for all of Inglis’s aether, but Eris and Ripple were different. They didn’t just accept her aether; they amplified and returned it.

Inglis had felt this before when wearing Tiffanyer. Her power increased to the point where she was barely even herself. Something similar happened to Rochefort when he’d wielded Arles, who’d sublimated his mana into dusty aether, and now it was happening to Inglis. The quality, the sheer volume, of the aether was far beyond that of a divine knight, half-human and half-god. Right now, she thought she was at least seventy or eighty percent of the way to being a true god. A vessel which could amplify her aether to this extent was truly awesome. It was a weapon closer to those of the gods than even

the holy swords they had bestowed upon humanity. Perfectly befitting of its epithet as the ultimate Artifact.

Eris's voice echoed in Inglis's head. *"A-Amazing! This is amazing! I can't feel your life force flow out! You just might really be able to wield us safely!"*

Then she sensed Ripple's voice. *"Me too! I think we can do this! Go for it, Inglis! Give 'em hell!"*

"Well, if you say so!" Inglis sheathed Eris and pointed her finger at the Prismer, which was gathering its power. "Aether Pierce!"

Inglis fired not one shot but an entire barrage. At first, they tore small holes in the Prismer, but then they became ineffective, and then the wounds healed. This was not the power of the hial menaces, but Inglis's own aether, and the results were as expected.

"Its resistances! It healed," Eris remarked.

"Inglis, be careful!" Ripple said.

"Yes! Aether Strike!"

Two voices shouted in her head. *"Huuuh?! Wa—"*

Blammmmmmm!

Before they could stop her, Inglis slammed an Aether Strike into the Prismer. The wavelength was the same as the Aether Pierces Inglis had just fired, and the Prismer, struck by a massive blast of light, recovered quickly. In no time at all, it was back to perfect health, without a scratch on it. It glowed with an ever-increasing, sublime brightness—one so dazzling that it was hard to even look at.

"All right!" Inglis nodded, satisfied.

"What do you mean, all right?! Just what are you thinking?!" Eris demanded.

"I told you to give 'em hell, not pandemonium!" Ripple said.

Inglis could hear Eris and Ripple's confused voices. "I don't have any ulterior motives. Just, it's wounded, so I helped it recover. If both fighters aren't in their best condition, it can't be called a fair match. And even so, it's essentially three-on-one."

"Now's not the time for that! You're supposed to be protecting everyone, right?!" Eris asked.

"There's a time and a place for everything, and this is time to be serious, yeah?" Ripple said.

"I am being serious! But I didn't say I wasn't going to have any fun!"

"Agh! Right, that's the kind of girl you are! And to think I was so moved!" Eris complained.

"Well, now that we're in this situation, let's stay positive and do our best from here on!" Ripple said.

“Hee hee!” With an excited grin, Inglis again drew the twin blades that were Eris. Dropping her hips low, she readied herself to strike at any moment. “Sometimes, it’s nice to get drunk—drunk on the ultimate power!”

“We certainly are not going to become drunk on power! We’re not bloodthirsty like you!” Eris protested.

Ripple, though, had other thoughts. *“Right there with you, Inglis! Show me that ultimate power!”*

“Not you too, Ripple!”

“I kinda wanna take down a Prismer and feel good about it for a change! Don’t you think so, Eris?”

“Well... Yes, I think I’d like that, but...!”

“Leave it to me! Here I go!” Inglis took a step forward—and as she did, a ring of light pulsed from her foot, like a ripple on the surface of water, and she seemed to vanish. She took a second step, reappearing and disappearing again.

The next ripple appeared halfway between where she had begun her last step and where the Prismer was. A mere two steps had taken her this far. Of course, it was a distance that could not be covered in only two steps, and yet she’d done it. Inglis was using a flow of aether that allowed her such feats. In fact, she’d *created* that flow of aether.

That was thanks to the effect the hial menaces had, as they sublimated her aether. She had taken a step beyond being a demigod divine knight—into the realm of the truly divine.

Without stirring, a god could look down upon the world, and if the desire took them, be in any place in an instant. The gaze of the almighty is not the same as the gaze of mankind, and a goddess’s pace is not the same as a human’s.

A casual glance, a single step. It was true divinity, true aether that could control the relativity of the world at will with such simple gestures. Not by making a quicker or stronger effect within the physical world, but by *changing the world itself* to make their step infinitely faster or stronger. It was true omnipotence. It was what it meant to truly control aether. Inglis’s normal use of aether was still unrefined—crude brute force, but nothing more complex than that. It was not true divine power that could rewrite the world itself; it was not yet hi-aether.

Even the purest of the gods were not perfect and had their strengths and weaknesses. Only the primordial God, the Creator, was unlimited in its capability with hi-aether—or so the goddess Alistia, who had made Inglis a divine knight, had said. She herself was not infallible, and thus required Inglis’s aid, she had said.

And now Inglis too had stepped into the realm of hi-aether—if only a little bit, with Eris and Ripple’s help. This was the result. To

turn one step into ten, a hundred, a thousand... With enough power, Divine Feat could be made as large as she wanted. With her third step, Inglis was directly behind the fully recovered Prismer.

“Good day to you.”

As she smiled and curtsied, the Prismer turned around in surprise.

“*Ah! She somehow appeared across that distance!*” Eris gasped, amazed by the movement from Divine Feat.

Ripple was just as surprised. “*Huh?! When did she—?!*”

“BE...GONE!” The Prismer took to the sky with its restored wings. In the blink of an eye, it was just a speck in the distance. It was amazingly fast. It raised its hands in the air. Its starlike gleam faded.

And in exchange, a fearsome globe of light appeared in its hands.

“*What?! What is that?!*” Eris shouted.

“*It’s big enough to swallow all of Ahlemin?! How do we—?!*”

The intense glow was the same as what had enveloped the Prismer. It must have been building up its power for this attack, and it seemed to have been well worth the effort. This attack would be far grander than the ones before. It reminded Inglis of a moon, or a falling meteor. That was how tremendously huge it was. If the Prismer was able to loose this attack and let it explode, there wouldn’t be a trace left of Ahlemin.

The knights gaped in dismay.

“It... It’s all over, isn’t it... There’s nowhere to run from that!”

“We’re doomed...”

The incoming attack was overwhelming. The feeling of despair on the battlefield inside Ahlemin was heavy. Even Eris and Ripple were in awe. It seemed unavoidable. The intensity of the battlefield had turned to tense quiet.

Only Inglis was pleased as she gazed upon the Prismer’s gigantic blast of light. “It’s beautiful. So fierce... Filled with the determination to destroy everything that moves... That’s what I was waiting for. You’ve remembered your pride as a magicite beast. How wonderful!”

“*That’s making you smile?! How can you be pleased by that?!*” Eris asked.

“*And your eyes are gleaming in anticipation!*” Ripple pointed out.

“A real fight is better than any training! The stronger your foe is, the more you learn! Here it comes!”

As Inglis expected, the Prismer swung down its raised arms.

“TAKE THIS!”

Rrrrrrrrrumble!

Like a meteor falling from the heavens, the ball of light plunged downward. Even before it exploded, the air itself shook, light spurted

forth, and the ground shook and crumbled. It was like the end of the world.

“Then I’ve got something too!” For the first time, Inglis reached for the golden gun holstered at the small of her back. As she rested her finger on the trigger, she raised her right hand holding the gun and pointed the muzzle toward the center of the blast of light. “Fair and square, head-to-head! Here we go, Ripple!”

“Okay! If it’s come to this, I’ll give it my all! I don’t know what we can really do, but I won’t give up! Let’s do this, Inglis!”

Now, to see the power of the hialal menace, the ultimate Artifact!

Inglis thought. “Go!”

“Goooooooooooo!”

Blammmmmmm!

A torrent of light shot forth from the golden gun, one as wide as the Prismer’s sphere of light which bore down on them. It was like a waterfall of light that had reversed its course and flowed upward, from the ground to the heavens. It burst through the night sky, scattering its beautiful radiance.

And then, it struck the falling meteor dead-on. The surging bullet of light didn’t struggle with the meteor, but instead at once immediately began to lift it upward!

Blammmmmmm!

The light continued upward, not slowing or quieting at all.

“What?! There’s no resistance?! That’s incredible!” Eris said.

“It’s never been like this before! Not with anyone who’s wielded me!”

Ripple said. They were both awestruck by the sight.

The Prismer’s meteor attack was repelled past it, practically grazing its beak. “OHHHHH?!” Even the Prismer was astounded by this turn of events. The meteor and the upwelling of light, having reached the heavens, exploded and disappeared.

A tremendous explosion raged in the sky. It was like a new sun, lighting up the earth.

And clearly in the light of day, the Prismer saw a human figure descend toward it. It grunted in surprise.

The figure was, of course, Inglis. “That was a nice attack!”

Landing on the Prismer’s shoulder, she smiled. With Divine Feat, it was no problem at all for her to move above the Prismer, to make one step carry her up into the great blue yonder, rewriting the laws of the world such that it would be so big. That was how divine beings moved. “Now let’s fight some more.” She smiled, as if she were

inviting the Prismer to dance.

If this were a soiree, and her partner an ordinary man, surely an invitation from such a beauty would be accepted.

But the Prismer refused. “STAY AWAY!” The Prismer swooped downward, trying to shake Inglis off.

As it plunged toward the ramparts of Ahlemin, it found her there, already waiting, her arms spread and gripping the blades that were Eris to hold it back. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t come any closer to this town. Just you being near it is dangerous.”

Grunting, the Prismer looked to where it expected her to be in the sky, then back to where she stood. It was clearly quite confused. Back and forth again it looked, then again, before flapping its wings. It moved back and to the right silently—or rather, it was so fast that it moved faster than the speed of sound. But as it flitted away in an instant, rings of light like ripples on water appeared in its flight path. And together with that light, Inglis appeared ahead of it again.

Sensing her, the Prismer reacted with a start.

“Thank—” As Inglis began to give it her appreciation for moving away from the town, she was interrupted.

Booooooom!

The shock waves from the Prismer’s speed drowned out her voice. The clouds of dust they produced blocked her vision. Taking advantage of this, the Prismer turned sharply away from her. But even there, her smiling face awaited it.

“FAST?!”

Booooooom!

Its sonic booms swallowed its own gasp of surprise.

“Yes? Did you say something?”

“GRAHHHH!” With a shout, the Prismer began to fly in all directions. Up and down, side to side, in every way possible. Just the supersonic flight of its massive body was enough to cause a raging shock wave around it.

But even in the midst of that, Inglis was staying ahead of the Prismer. Quietly, and with no hurry, she closed in on the beast with every step.

In the end, breathing heavily, the Prismer was brought to a stop near Ahlemin’s walls. “WHY! SO! QUIET... FAST?!”

The Prismer’s full-speed flight had created a storm of shock waves. Yet Inglis, even while staying ahead of it, was completely quiet. The Prismer was unnerved by this realization.

“I’m neither running around nor jumping. I thought I should try to be ladylike,” Inglis responded with an incredibly graceful smile. Her expression, at least, achieved that goal. If she had physically moved faster than the Prismer, she would have caused even more damage to her surroundings. That was just a law of nature. But Divine Feat was not subject to the laws of nature.

Hearing Inglis’s response, the Prismer kept its eyes on her as it raised its right palm toward the town. “NO...MOVE! THIS TIME... THIS TIME!”

It seemed to want to try the same thing again. Unfortunately, after all the confusion, matters had returned to the same place.

Well, not completely the same—this time, it seemed to want to attack from a distance rather than catch her and crush her.

“That won’t help you.” The moment Inglis spoke, countless lines of light ran up and down the Prismer’s right arm. The arm went to pieces, and fell away.

“RRRAAH! HATE...YOU!” Still not giving up, the Prismer thrust its left hand toward the town.

A little bit of knowledge can be a dangerous thing. Inglis would have preferred if, rather than relying on that superficial borrowing, the Prismer had shown more of its magicite beast instinct to be always aggressive and always on the attack, pressing in on her to the very end.

“I’m sorry, but that won’t help you either.”

This time, the Prismer’s left arm was shredded in the same way. “GWAHH!” the Prismer bellowed as it writhed. Behind it stretched the outskirts of town, foothills leading to a mountain.

Slash, slash, slash!

Countless flashes of light raced forth, leaving long, deep, tremendous scars. In an instant, the landscape changed completely, as if it had been cut to pieces. With a muffled roar, the mountain seemed to crumble from within. It was the aftermath of Eris’s attack—but *aftermath* hardly did it justice.

“That was amazing, Eris! More than I could have imagined!” Inglis was honestly shocked. Hial menaces were just *too* powerful. Just grasping one in her hands had enhanced her power to that of an actual god. Truly, it was the ultimate power. Truly, it was intoxicating.

“Er... Ah... I cut through that?! I didn’t even notice! What just happened?!” Even Eris herself didn’t seem to understand completely.

But the most surprised, the most horrified, was none other than the Prismer. “OH... OH! FEARSOME! FIRST!” Perhaps it was because

it had become so human. The Prismer shuddered as it backed away and soared upward as fast as it could.

“Please wait! The battle isn’t over yet.” Inglis stepped above it with Divine Feat.

But the Prismer swept her out of its way and continued its climb. “FEARSOME!” It was in a frenzy, and seemed to be completely blind to its surroundings.

Another use of Divine Feat. Inglis reappeared above the Prismer’s head. “Calm down! Let’s fight calmly!”

Shaking that off too, the Prismer single-mindedly climbed higher and higher. This repeated over and over, and as they pierced the clouds Inglis saw something floating in the sky—far, far away. Was that Highland?

Were they that high? This might be a bad sign. If Highland could see this display, it might cause quite the stir.

“FEARSOME, FEARSOME, FEARSOME!”

“It’s okay, it’s okay! I won’t try any more attacks you can’t see, let’s go back down and take our time!”

“UWAHHHHHH!” Unfortunately, the Prismer’s twists and turns had pointed it toward Highland.

“Is that Highland?! Oh no, we have to stop it!” Eris gasped.

“We don’t know what’s going to happen, Inglis!” Ripple chimed in.

“When you put it that way, I guess I have no choice!”

She’d learned a new technique: Divine Feat. A real fight truly was better than any training. Inglis had gotten quite used to this. A ring of light spread in the sky like a ripple on water—and above the Prismer’s head, Inglis appeared, ready to swing Eris’s pommels toward it. “Haaaah!”

Both pommels struck the Prismer at the same time!

Slammmmmmm!

A roar that must have been audible even in Highland shook the sky. The Prismer plunged back downward, falling headfirst. In an instant, it was only a speck in Inglis’s vision.

But the next moment, it was filling her sight again. Not because it was coming back, but because she had gotten ahead of its fall. She was back on the outskirts of Ahlemin, a ripple-like ring of light surrounding her again. Sheathing the blades, Inglis drew the golden gun and aimed it skyward. There was no need to aim precisely; she just glanced up at the night sky. The target would fall into her sights on its own!

“Farewell!”



Blammmmmmm!

Again, a torrent of light flew skyward. It wrapped around the Prismer's form, tearing it to pieces. In a matter of seconds, no trace remained of the Prismer; all that remained was a beautiful column of light.

"Next time, don't forget your pride as a magicite beast. Be born again and find me for a rematch, please." Inglis looked up at the sky with a wistful smile. No one was there to answer her.

And finally...

"Phew, I'm exhausted."

Inglis rested her back on a nearby boulder and sat down. She was at her limits. The toll of her wounds, and of wielding hial menaces at full power, was great. She had gotten drunk on the ultimate power, just as she said she would.

"We won the fight, but during it... I was impressed by your power," Inglis said to the Prismer that no longer existed.

To Inglis, Eris and Ripple were not merely weapons. Wielding them had made this a three-on-one fight. It wasn't exactly the fair match she'd wanted. She'd tried to avoid that for as long as possible. In the one-on-one, she'd honestly been on the back foot. If she couldn't come out on top, she couldn't truly say that she'd mastered the blade. If it was for Rafinha's sake, she was willing to bend her convictions, but...

Even though she had intoxicated herself with the power of the ultimate Artifacts, even though it had been a good learning experience, she had her regrets about this victory. She still had room to grow. She needed to work harder at her training and learn to take down a Prismer without the aid of hial menaces.

The blades and gun she wore shone and changed their forms. Eris and Ripple were back to human shape.

"Ha ha, I didn't know I could be that awesome... I've never seen shots like that," Ripple said.

"Yes, that was shocking. There isn't a trace left of the Prismer..." Eris said.

"Good work, both of you. Thank you." Inglis bowed, and they answered with beaming smiles.

"It was our honor. You did so well!" Eris answered.

"Thanks!" Ripple said. "Thanks so much, Inglis!" She was so excited that she tried to embrace Inglis, but Inglis could do nothing but collapse, sprawled out. Even sitting up had been hard for her.

"Whoa! Are you okay, Inglis?!"

"Yes, just... I am a bit tired..."

A hand lifted up her head. "Eris?"

Eris rested Inglis's head on her lap. "This is all I can do for you... But please, get some rest."

"Yes... Thank you..." Exhaustion washed over Inglis, and she closed her eyes.

"Inglis?! Are you okay?!" Nervously, Ripple brought her ear to Inglis's chest, listening for a pulse. The hial menaces hadn't felt Inglis's life draining away when they were weapons, but Ripple was still worried that she may have missed it.

"Y-Yes!" Eris said. "She's okay! She's breathing! It seems like she really is sleeping." Eris let out a sigh of relief as she felt Inglis's breath.

"Thank goodness... But she looks so cute sleeping, it's making me feel tired too..."

"Yes... Me too..."

Existing in their weapon form was draining for Eris and Ripple, but this was exhaustion like they never had felt before. The power Inglis had drawn forth from them had just been so intense. Their consciousness faded as well...

Rafinha came rushing up to the three of them "Chris! Eris! Ripple!" She checked on the three of them collapsed together. "Thank goodness, they're just sleeping—but...!"

One problem remained. Behind her, Ahlemin was noisy.

"Wow!"

"The Prismer has fallen! We can't afford to die now!"

"Yeah! If we survive this, we've won!"

Sounds of battle still echoed in its streets. The Prismer was gone, but its army of magicite beasts remained. They couldn't let their guard down yet. But Inglis, Eris, and Ripple each slept, too deeply to be awakened. And Rafael, whom Inglis had knocked out, was still down for the count. So it fell to her to do their parts.

"Chris! Thank you so much! Thank you for everything! I'll try my best with the rest!" Rafinha hugged the sleeping Inglis before she turned her eyes toward Ahlemin.

Then, as she rushed to battle, something suddenly appeared over her, and three familiar voices from overhead cried out. "Rafinha!"

"Leone! Liselotte! Pullum!" She saw the three riding on a huge dragon. "M-Mister Dragon?!"

The dragon's form was familiar. But the Highlander Evel had taken over Fufailbane's body, turned him to a mechanical ancient dragon, and brought him back to Highland. And this one was smaller than Fufailbane personally—*Is "personally" the right word?* she wondered. If Fufailbane was an adult, this was like a child.

"Are you okay?!" We were watching from far away and saw a real bright light come flying up," the dragon spoke.

“Huuuuuuuh?! Lahti?!” The voice was definitely his. *What in the world?!* Rafinha began to marvel.

“Yeah, that’s me! We finished up there and came down to help out!”

“How are you—? No, never mind that! Chris, with Eris and Ripple’s help, defeated the Prismer!”

“So that’s what caused that light...” Leone said.

“It was like a waterfall streaming up into the sky!” Liselotte exclaimed.

“So we’re a little too late...” Pullum said.

“No, you’re not late at all!” Rafinha insisted. “After that, all three were too exhausted to keep going! Look, in town! There are still magicite beasts! We need to take them down! Chris is asleep, so let’s help out!”

“All right, leave it to me!” Lahti said. “I can carry more! A lot more!”

“Thanks! Let’s get Chris and the others! And Rafael too!”

“Even Rafael?! Is he all right?! Did one of the Prismer’s attacks hurt him?!” Liselotte checked.

“N-Not exactly... Brother, well, Chris kind of...”

“Huh?!” Pullum exclaimed in shock. “D-Did they get in a fight?!”

“She had no choice! Anyway, let’s hurry! The Prismer’s already down, so let’s handle the rest!”

“Yes, of course! I’m so grateful to you for protecting Ahlemin! I know I’m late, but I’ll do everything I can!” Leone nodded intently to Rafinha, her expression full of fighting spirit.

“You seem all fired up, Leone!”

“Yes! A lot’s happened here, some good, some bad...but it’s where I was born and raised! I want to do whatever I can! For Leon’s sake too!”

Because Leone had phrased it like that, Rafinha figured she must have gotten a chance to talk with Leon, and made up a little. That was what Rafinha had been hoping for anyway.

The dragon Lahti, carrying Rafinha and the others, rushed toward the battle within Ahlemin. “All right, everyone! Let’s go!”

Chapter VII: Inglis, Age 15—Battle with the Prismers (5)

The royal palace in Chiral, capital of Karelia, was already lively in the early morning. Amidst the social energy, the doors to a guest room opened forcefully.

“All right! Time for another day of enjoying good food!” Rafinha stretched her limbs in excitement.

“Precisely,” Inglis said with a smile. “We don’t often get a chance like this. We should enjoy ourselves to the fullest.”

The palace had held daily banquets celebrating their victory over the Prismers. The revival of the Prismers had been a national crisis; its defeat was a great deed that would live on in history. Royalty and nobility from all over the country had gathered at the palace to celebrate, and the victorious heroes—Inglis and Rafinha—were lauded day in and day out. They’d had no time to return to their room at the academy and were therefore staying at a guest room in the palace instead.

The repeated formalities had become a bit grating, but there was one thing they never got tired of: filling their bellies with delicacies. Today, they were faced with a delicious dilemma—meat or fish?

“Good morning. You seem to be in good spirits today.” Eris had been waiting for Inglis and Rafinha just outside the guest room. She wore a softer smile than usual as she greeted them.

“Thank you!” Inglis and Rafinha both returned her greeting with a smile, but then Rafinha looked a little confused. “Eris, you’ve been doing this for three days... You must be worried about Chris!”

“W-Well, yes... She seemed to have been hurt in the fight, and more importantly, I’m worried about any repercussions from her wielding me and Ripple.”

Inglis reassured the hial menace. “Thank you, Eris, but as you can see, I’m fine. I haven’t experienced anything odd since the fight. You don’t need to worry.”

“I know, just... You know? If anything were to... I’m sorry, I realize this must be annoying you.”

“It—” Inglis began, but Rafinha cut her off before she could finish.

“It isn’t at all! I’m happy to see your face every morning!”

“Huh, really?” Eris seemed a little taken aback.

“Yes! You’re beautiful, and you seem happier than before. I’m so

glad.” Rafinha’s carefree smile shone brighter than anything to Inglis. Rani made observations and evaluations of others without making them feel judged. She could meet people on their own terms. Rafinha was a granddaughter-like figure to be proud of.

“Eris, I feel the same way as Rani.”

“Really? Thanks.” Eris’s smile was definitely brighter than before.

“All right, now let’s meet up with Leone and Liselotte!”

“Yeah.”

Leone and Liselotte had returned to the dorms, but they were due to make an appearance at the palace today. With the war in Alcard over and Leon telling them of the danger in Ahlemin, they had rushed to the scene. Inglis had already defeated the Prismer by the time they arrived, but their assistance in the cleanup of the remaining magicite beasts had been remarkably helpful. Officials had definitely noted their efforts.

Rafael had awakened while there were still magicite beasts to quell, and in the end, he’d slain the most of anyone. While he was commended for that, credit for defeat of the Prismer had gone to Inglis, the hial menaces Eris and Ripple, and their commander, Rafinha.

Thus, prestige had been spread evenly, and the results of the battle wouldn’t weaken the positions of Rafael, Eris, or Ripple. Inglis had wanted to defeat the Prismer alone and hadn’t foreseen being forced to wield the hial menaces, but maybe that was for the best. Officials had recognized the follow-up contributions from Leone, Liselotte, Lahti, and Pullum; the actions of Silva, Yua, and the other academy students were also recognized, along with those of their leader, Miriela.

Leone had been pleased to fight in Ahlemin’s defense, but an unexpectedly important contribution had come from Lahti. His decision to leave Alcard to fight for Karelia in Ahlemin against the beasts had been met with significant protest, but his deeds held political significance. It had been a striking gesture of goodwill from Alcard toward Karelia, one which might yet mean that the countries’ differences could be settled at the negotiating table. At the very least, the faction that wanted to settle things quietly could use his actions to bolster their position, to argue that Alcard had changed its posture and joined in the fight against the Prismer. Whether Lahti had thought that far ahead when he brought Leone and the others, Inglis wasn’t sure, but she believed the situation was taking a turn for the better.

“Then, Eris, we’ll see you at the banquet.”

“Yes, I’m looking forward to it. Though I am a little surprised at how much you’ve been eating.”

“Oh, right, Eris!” Rafinha broke in, her eyes glittering as she

clapped her hands. "I thought of a good idea!"

"Hm?"

"What is it, Rani?" Inglis asked.

"Eris, you've been coming to the banquets, but you're always in uniform! Why not wear a fancy dress like us for once?" She and Inglis had been attending the banquets in evening gowns while Eris had kept to her usual attire.

There was nothing improper about attending in uniform, and Eris was certainly quite glamorous in that as well, but Rafinha's desire to see her in a different outfit was understandable.

"Ah?! No, that's fine! A hial menace doesn't—"

"But you are a lady, and it's important for ladies to be fashionable! I want to see you in an evening gown! I'm sure you'll look just as gorgeous as Chris. Yeah, yeah!" Rafinha's eyes sparkled even brighter.

"Rani *loves* to dress people up. I'd appreciate your company, Eris."

"B-But I don't want to be just a spectacle..."

"That's where you're wrong, Eris," Inglis continued. "Dressing up isn't for other people's benefit—it's for you to enjoy yourself! That's why I have fun wearing those gowns. Why not enjoy it with me?"

"Well..." Eris seemed reticent, but not dead set against the idea, so Inglis pressed on.

"I think even a hial menace needs to have fun once in a while. At least, as long as I'm doing it too."

"I see... If you say so."

Rafinha took Eris's right hand and pulled her along. "All right! Good job, Chris! So let's meet up with Leone and Liselotte, and then we'll go pick out a dress for Eris!"

"Whoa! H-Hold on!"

"Strike while the iron is hot! Let's go!" Inglis took Eris by her left hand and ran down the palace corridor.

Hours later, Eris found herself in the palace's dressing room before the banquet, staring at the foreign person in the mirror.

"I... I can't let Ripple see me like this..." Eris wore a navy-blue evening gown of Rafinha's choosing. The girl had even braided Eris's hair into an updo with floral decorations.

"Wow! ♪ Eris, you look just as good as Chris! ♪ You look so incredibly graceful, like a princess or something."

"She really does," Leone agreed.

"I can't help but admire her," Liselotte said.

The two gazed at Eris in awe. She appeared only a little bit older than the two of them, but the mature charm she exuded was something they strongly admired. Inglis had to smile at the scene—and at herself in the mirror. She was pleased with her outfit for the

day.

“Thank you. You’re very good with hair,” Eris said.

“Yep! I’ve gotten a lot of practice on Chris!” Rafinha replied. “But I’m sad Ripple won’t get to see you look this good.”

“No, that’s fine... Let’s keep this our little secret. I wouldn’t want to annoy her.”

Ripple was still dealing with the aftermath of the battle and hadn’t returned to the palace. She wasn’t expected to return until tomorrow.

But then the door to the dressing room opened. “Hmm? Oh, what? Is someone talking about little old me?” Ripple peeked in.

“R-Ripple?! You were supposed to be back tomorrow!”

“I made it back a little early. There was less damage than I expected. Heard everyone was here, so I came to take a look-see, but... Whooooa! Eris, is that *you*?! Are you wearing what I think you’re wearing?!”

“Well, the girls thought it was a good idea, so...”

“Wow! It’s great! It looks perfect on you, Eris!” Ripple approached Eris with a smile, her hands playing with Eris like a doll. “It’s good to have fun like this, and this is the first time we’ve been able to celebrate in this kind of way after taking down a Prismer! Wasn’t expecting you to be the one of us really getting into it, though! Normally you wouldn’t be like this at all. You’d say something like, ‘This is no time to get carried away.’”

“I-It’s fine! This is special! Something really special happened!”

“Yeah, you’re right. But I guess that means I’m gonna be the stick-in-the-mud showing up in uniform. Ahh, I wish I had something cute to wear to have fun at the victory party!” Ripple shrugged.

Eris grinned in response. “You heard the lady! Let’s give her what she wants!”

“Yes!” Smiling, Rafinha caught Ripple. “Here we go, Ripple! Right this way! I’ll help get you changed!”

“Huh? What’s going on, Rafinha?!”

“I thought this might happen, so I prepared something for you too!”

“Leave it all to Rani,” Inglis suggested. “It’s fun to get dressed up.”

“Can I put a ribbon on your tail?” Rafinha asked. “I think it’ll look adorable!”

“Eeek! Rafinha, I’m ticklish there!”

“It’s for the sake of fashion! Fashion requires sacrifices!”

Before long, Ripple emerged.

“Wow! ♪ Ripple, you look so cute! ♪” Rafinha squealed.

Ripple’s gown was a pale orange, and cute ribbons adorned her ears and tail. While Eris exuded sophisticated beauty, Ripple was

vivacious and amiable; each had their own charm.

“R-Really? You’re sure this works for me?” Ripple asked. “I don’t get dressed up like this a lot, so I mean, sure it’s novel, but I’m a little worried.”

“There’s no reason to worry,” Inglis reassured her. “It looks great on you.”

“Exactly!” Leone said.

“Indeed!” Liselotte chimed in as well.

“R-Really?”

“I think it looks good on you,” Eris said. “Anyway, since we’re already dressed for celebration, let’s try enjoying it.”

“Ha ha ha. You’re finally able to say that.” Ripple smiled wholeheartedly and took Inglis’s arm. “Thanks, Inglis. You made it so we can enjoy ourselves today.”



“Ripple’s right,” Eris agreed. “I never thought this day would come. Thank you. So...shall we be off?”

Inglis’s eyes twinkled at that. “Yes! Let’s eat, and eat, and eat, and have fun!”

“I don’t believe I can eat that much!” Eris said.

“You and Rafinha are gonna have to handle that part...” Ripple said.

Flanked by Eris and Ripple, Inglis left the dressing room.



About a month later, Inglis and Rafinha sat aboard the *Star Princess*. The clear blue sky above and the grassy plains below made for pleasant, reassuring scenery. Amidst them, the walls of the fortified city Ymir and its buildings within came into view.

“Wow! I can see it! I can see it, Chris! This brings back so many memories! ♪”

“Me too, Rani. But this is the first time we’ve seen Ymir from the sky, so this is its own new experience.”

“Yeah, you’re right! Ahh! I know it’s only been a few months, but it feels like years!”

“A lot has happened. We even fought a Prismer! Wasn’t that great?”

“I’d rather not remember that part. But now that we’re back in Ymir, I feel relieved! There’s no place like home!”

“Ha ha ha. Well, it really is home, so let’s take it easy. We’ve been so busy lately.”

The academy was on break now, so Inglis and Rafinha had returned to Ymir. It was their very first vacation home. This break was scheduled, but it still felt like a reward after some very busy days. Inglis and Rafinha, key players in the uniquely historic defeat of the Prismer, had become celebrities in the capital.

Their fame had likely spread throughout Karelia at this point. Inglis’s approach had been calculated to preserve the honor of Rafael and the Paladins, but even still, she was nervous about what awaited her. Since she had so strongly refused command of the Royal Guard at first, and insisted that it only be temporary, she had been able to avoid being drawn further into the political or military realms, allowing her to remain as a first-year student at the academy, but... That was in large part due to the understanding nature of King Carlias and the prior commander—Reddas. How the future would turn out was still unclear.

“That’s right! Let’s hurry up and take it easy! Booster mode!”

“Yep! Let’s go!”

The Star Princess suddenly accelerated, and soon it had reached the castle of Duke Bilford and his family. When they landed in the garden, both Inglis's mother and her aunt had already seen the *Star Princess* and were there waiting for them.

"Chris!"

"Rafinha!"

"Mother!"

"Mom!"

It was a reunion full of smiles...and then Inglis and Rafinha stared.

"Mother..."

"Mom..."

The two girls suddenly had one very large question on their minds.

"May I ask what you're carrying?"

"Yeah, what are those?"

Serena and Irina were carrying many letters.

"Ah..."

"These are..."

With wide smiles, they spoke in unison. "Letters from suitors! Look how many there are!"

"Huh?!" Inglis blurted out.

"Wow! Who are they from?!"

Inglis's twisted grimace and Rafinha's glowing smile couldn't have been more at odds.

Extra: New Gear

One morning, after the tempo of banquets at the palace had died down, Inglis and Rafinha made their return to lessons at the knights' academy. After a long while, they were back in their uniforms.

"It's been a long time since we've been able to enjoy the food at the cafeteria. It really makes me feel like we're back," Inglis observed with a grin.

"That's right," Rafinha said. "The food at the palace was delicious, but the food here in the cafeteria is good too."

"It's been a long time since the lunch ladies had to work that hard," Leone said.

"Ah, yes, the daily routine... Just watching it gives me heartburn," Liselotte groaned.

"I guess it's the same no matter where they are." Lahti sighed.

"But it's nice to feel like peace has finally returned," Pullum said.

Lahti and Pullum had both remained in the capital for the upcoming summit between Alcard and Karelia. However, after that was over, they'd be returning home, meaning these were their last few days as academy students.

"Really, though. After everything that's happened, I'm gonna miss this sort of stuff with you all," Lahti said.

Seeing their melancholy air, Rafinha patted them on the back. "We're all back here together, so let's perk up and have some fun! There's a special assembly this morning! I bet something interesting's going on!"

"I guess. Sure hope it ain't another absurd training session."

"Hmm... You're right, I don't want to run all the way to the Flygear dock again either..."

"Returning to the basics is a valid approach," Inglis said. "Oh, by the way, Lahti. When we're running, can you change into a dragon and ride on my back? I think you'd be just the right weight."

Adding the weight of a dragon—even a small dragon—to the enhanced gravity she trained under sounded like an excellent practice session to Inglis.

"No way! Everyone would be staring, and if I'm gonna transform, I want to use it to beat you in a race! Maybe I can at least win that way!"

"Sounds fun. I'm up for it."

“All right, it’s on!”

As they talked, they headed to the courtyard where the assembly was to be held.

“Good mooorning, everyone! ♪” Principal Miriela was there waiting for them, and she was all smiles. “Today, we’re all taking a field trip to the palace!”

The academy students were abuzz with excitement.

“The palace?!”

“Are we going to get a tour?!”

“We might even get to meet His Majesty!”

“No, no, no! It’s something eeeven better than just that! Tee hee! ♪” Miriela’s eyes sparkled. Though it might be a bit problematic to describe a royal audience so casually, her expression and tone of voice made it clear that she was very excited.

“What is it, then, Principal?”

“The knights’ academy is getting some new gear,” she replied.

“Gear?” the students echoed.

“Yes! Let’s go!”

Inglis raced Lahti to the palace—and won. Once everyone arrived, all the students were in a clamor.

“Wow!”

“So this is the academy’s new gear?!”

The students cheered. It was the flying battleship that had made an emergency landing in the canal by the palace—the one General Rochefort of Venefic had used in his assault on the capital. Inglis’s attacks had forced it to crash into the canal.

“Indeed! We captured it from Venefic, and I’ve received approval to have the students of the knights’ academy repair and operate it!” Miriela giggled. “I’ve always wanted a Highland flying battleship! This is a dream come true!” Overjoyed, she took Inglis by both hands and shook them. “Thank you so much for capturing it rather than completely destroying it, Inglis! Because of that, the academy is now fully equipped!” She was like a child who had a new favorite toy.

“Ha ha ha... I’m curious about the engineering of flying battleships as well, so I’m pleased. I’m surprised the academy managed to get its hands on it, though. I’m sure many others were interested as well.”

It could have gone to the Paladins or the Royal Guard, not to mention the many knightly orders under individual aristocrats who must have wanted it. Inglis found it unusual for such a potent weapon to go to the Chiral Knights’ Academy instead.

“Well, you’re the one who’s covered herself in glory these past few weeks, and we’re the ones training you, so it seems feeding you for free has been worth it!”

“I see. A win-win situation.”

“Indeed it is! And this is far less likely to cause offense in Venefic or Highland than pressing it into military use. The academy accepts exchange students from other countries, so it can be presented as not solely in Karelia’s interest.”

That was true. It was important to have an explanation for everything. The invasion and the defeat of the reborn Prismers weren’t the end of the story. Life went on. That’s how it was.

“And... If we can get this repaired and operational, we might be able to do other things. It could even be a turning point in history!”

“History, huh... Well, as for me, once it’s repaired, I’d like to take it around the world seeking and destroying Prismers as part of my warrior’s training.” Inglis’s eyes gleamed just as bright as Principal Miriela’s.

“Wow... It seems like a new era of world peace is dawning.”

“I don’t wanna! Are you gonna drag me into that again?” Rafinha protested.

“It’ll be fun,” Inglis said.

“In what world is that fun?! It’s terrifying! Anyway, Principal Miriela, we’re painting over the Venefic ensign, right?” Rafinha’s eyes had a different glimmer.

“Ah, yes. That’s right, we need to change its emblem,” Miriela said.

Rafinha grinned. “All right! Hear that, Pullum?! We can paint it!”

“Yay!” Pullum cheered. “We can have all sorts of fun with a ship that big!”

The culprits behind the *Star Princess*’s glow-up were beaming with delight.

No one said you could just paint it however you wanted, Inglis thought.

“This is our last chance for school memories together, so let’s do our best and make it the cutest thing ever!” Rafinha said.

“Yeah, Rafinha!” Pullum agreed. “We’ll remember this for the rest of our lives!”

If Pullum was going to put it that way, Inglis couldn’t object. Nor could or would she if Rafinha was that insistent. Better to leave the exterior to them and have her own fun poking around its guts.

Miriela tugged Inglis’s sleeve. “Inglis, please stop them.”

“That’s not something I can do.” Inglis shook her head, her eyes closed. Her dear granddaughter’s whims were sacrosanct.

“W-Well, Rafinha, Pullum... Today, we’ll be busy getting the ship to the Flygear dock on Lake Bolt...”

It was then that someone appeared to call out to them. “Hey, if it isn’t the academy kids. Now that you’re all here, time to get to work, no? Otherwise you’re gonna run out of daylight.”

It was a familiar voice, with a distinct way of speaking. Turning toward it, Inglis saw the red-haired man she was expecting. However, he wasn't in his Venefic military uniform—instead, he wore the outfit of a knights' academy instructor. Next to him was a long-haired young demihuman woman with catlike ears and tail. She seemed very mature and ladylike. And just like him, she was wearing a knights' academy instructor's outfit.

“Rochefort?!”

“Arles?!”

Rochefort smirked at Inglis and Rafinha's surprised shouts. “Heh heh heh. Demerits for insubordination for these two young ladies, then?”

“Huh?!”

“Let's not, Ross. This happened out of the blue. Their surprise is understandable.” Arles stopped Rochefort with a wry smile.

“Rochefort... Arles... Wait, aren't they...?” Leone asked.

“Yes, the Venefic general and hial menace who Inglis and Rafinha mentioned!” Liselotte replied.

“Whaaat?!” The students around them were shocked.

“Y-Yes!” Miriela said. “Beginning today, they're visiting instructors at the knights' academy. Don't worry, though! His Majesty willed it, Prince Wayne assented, and I held an interview with them beforehand, so—”

Brushing aside Miriela, who was trying to smooth things over, Rochefort gave a deep and highly exaggerated bow to the students. “Pleased to meet you, everyone. Well, I'm still alive, so this is how it ends up. Gotta stay that way, so I'll be earning my keep here!”

“We'll be doing our best!” Arles bowed as well. Her motions and tone of voice were completely proper, and showed no signs of ill intent.

This was a bold staffing decision indeed. Many must have opposed it, but King Carlias had been able to persuade them anyway. *He seems to have a good grasp on how they really are*, Inglis thought. Arles was an extremely good person, and putting Rochefort's pretenses aside, he lived for her. It was better to put them to use together than to mistakenly suspect them and split them up.

And their appointment to the academy, just like the choice of what to do with the flying battleship, would avoid complications with Venefic and with Highland's Papal League. In particular, Arles, a hial menace, was even more of a big deal than a flying battleship.

At least, that's the cover story. King Carlias obviously has another purpose in mind. I'd said I wanted to fight Rochefort again. By sending him over as an instructor, I can fight him as much as I want—as long as I make sure things don't get out of hand. Inglis considered the staffing decision

a personal favor from the king. *An understanding king. Wonderful.*

Inglis stepped forward in front of Rochefort, her eyes full of pure childlike anticipation. "Instructor Rochefort! Instructor Arles! I'm happy to have you here! Let's get straight to combat training! Against both of you, if possible!"

"Huh? What? But...aren't we supposed to move that ship today?"

Arles looked extremely worried.

"That's right. We don't have time for that right now," Rochefort said.

"Does that mean if we finish early, you'll duel with me then?"

Inglis asked.

"As long as it's still during the school day. You're not getting any extracurriculars out of me."

"Understood! Then, I'll go right ahead!" Inglis turned to Arles and extended her hand. "Instructor Arles, would you give me a hand?"

"Yes, of course. What should I do?"

"I'd like you to transform into a shield for a moment," Inglis raised a finger and announced.

"Ehhhh?! That... That's not something to be used so casually!

Don't you realize that, Inglis?!"

Inglis whispered to her, "Yes. But I'll be fine even if I wield you. When I defeated the Prismers, I was wielding Eris and Ripple, and I'm still here."

"I... I see... Well, yes, I'd heard that, but..."

"Please! This is very important! I promise I won't do anything wrong!"

"But..." Arles looked to Rochefort for help.

"Sounds fine by me! A teacher's gotta respect their students' independence, right? We're definitely not just throwing in the towel because it's impossible to change this little skullcracker's mind."

"Ha ha ha..." Arles couldn't help but laugh, though she still winced in concern.

Rafinha groaned. "Mmm. I guess people really can understand each other through their fists... Instructor Rochefort understands Chris well."

"I thought that was more of a guys being guys thing," Leone said.

"Yes, but Inglis certainly likes to fight even more than that gentleman. It may apply in this case," Liselotte said.

"I suppose I can't argue with that."

"Well, if someone's gonna use a hial menace to their fullest, guess I should watch and see what I can pick up. That's how I made you mine, Arles."

"Ross..." Arles blushed, but she wasn't displeased.

The ears of the listening girls perked up at that.

“Made her his? You mean—” Leone began.

“They’re...together?” Liselotte asked.

“Yeah, they are. They’re as lovey-dovey as Lahti and Pullum,” Rafinha answered with a roguish smile.

“Hey, c’mon, this has nothing to do with us! Leave us out of it!” Lahti protested.

“But it’s true, isn’t it, Liselotte?” Leone said.

“Indeed it is.”

“Ooh, did you two see anything?” Rafinha asked.

“After you went on ahead from Alcard...” Leone began.

“You wouldn’t believe what they were sneaking around doing...” Liselotte continued. The two were blushing. They must have seen something shocking.

Pullum turned bright red and hurriedly tried to change the subject. “O-Oh my! S-Sorry! Once Lahti gets started...”

“Gah! Knock it off!”

The conversation had gone off in a completely different direction.

“Ah, to be young... Somehow, it makes me want to strangle someone,” Principal Miriela bemoaned.

“Principal, you don’t have to say something that silly. You can just ban improper fraternization with the opposite sex,” Inglis suggested. “Especially for Rani. Even only for Rani would be fine.”

Lahti and Pullum were already engaged, so it didn’t really matter what they did. Rochefort and Arles had a beautiful relationship. *But not Rafinha. Definitely not her. No partner, no improper relations. She’s still too young for that.*

Principal Miriela regained her composure and clapped her hands. “Enough, everyone! Let’s get back to work!”

“Then, Instructor Arles, I’d appreciate it if you’d help me finish this quickly!” Inglis said.

“Y-Yes, understood. I believe in you, Inglis.”

Arles took Inglis’s hand. A dazzling glow filled the area, and she transformed.

“Wow!”

“So this is what it’s like when a hial menace transforms?!”

As the students shouted, Arles became a golden shield studded with gems. The shield was huge—enough to obscure Inglis completely.

“A shield! And a giant one at that!” Leone gasped.

“But it’s beautiful!” Liselotte said.

“Whoa, look at *that*!” Lahti said.

“It looks really strong!” Pullum said.

“*Inglis! Are you all right?!*” Arles’s worried voice echoed in Inglis’s head.

“Yes. I’m fine, Instructor Arles. Are you sensing anything

strange?”

“No, nothing... Well, that in itself is strange, but...”

“I see. Then let’s get to work!” Inglis said with a nod. She placed the golden shield on her back to free up both hands. Then, she stepped into the shallows of the canal, and placed both hands on the flying battleship’s hull. “All right!”

“Wh-What are you doing? Weren’t you going to wield me?”

“Oh, I am.” *But not as a shield...* “Here I go!”

Divine Feat!

Ripples of light spread out from Inglis’s feet.

And the next moment, the world changed around her. She was by the Flygear dock on Lake Bolt. In front of her, the flying battleship bobbed in the lake’s waters. Divine Feat had moved the whole battleship here. Having gotten used to the ability, she was now able to come even this far with it. This was the first time she’d tried to carry something so heavy along with her, but it seemed to have gone fine.

I think I’ve gotten the hang of this, she thought. *Stepping even farther should be possible.* Divine Feat was how the gods moved infinite distances in a single step. “All right. That’s done with, then.” Inglis grinned and nodded.

“Ehhhhhhh?!” Arles’s shocked shriek echoed in her head. *“What even was that?! I didn’t know something like that was possible!”*

“Just a little cheat. Thanks to you.”

It was only the amplification of Inglis’s power by a transformed hialar menace that allowed her to use such a technique. It was plenty helpful both in and out of battle. How versatile, indeed.

“A cheat?!”

“Yes. Now let’s go back.” With another use of Divine Feat, Inglis was back to where Rafinha and the others were. “I’ve finished, Principal Miriela.”

“Wha—?! Ah, yes, er... Wait, did you take it to Lake Bolt in the blink of an eye?!”

“Yes. I left the flying battleship next to the Flygear dock.”

Liselotte quickly soared into the sky on the wings from her Gift and looked toward Lake Bolt. “It’s true! The flying battleship is already there!”

The students cheered. “Wow!”

“Sweet! Now we can take it easy!”

“Then, Instructor Rochefort, Instructor Arles. If we could get to that combat training? It appears we have plenty of time,” Inglis said.

“Huh? If you can pull that kinda trick out of your hat, what do you expect to learn from me? You just want to bully your teachers, don’t you?” Rochefort sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

“Come on, Ross. We promised her, so...” Arles began.

“Ah well, there’s nothing wrong with giving my students some help with training. No matter where you end up in life, you can’t escape from improving yourself,” Rochefort said.

“Yes. Let’s work hard together, Instructor!”

“Ahh, to be young. Then, does anyone else want to take on combat training against me?” Rochefort asked.

“Yes! I would too!” Leone was the first to raise her hand.

“Then, I shall as well.” Liselotte also raised her hand, and a number of other students followed suit.

“Well, I suppose if it helps you to get to know your new teachers better...” Miriela muttered.

“Pullum! Let’s go to the Flygear dock and paint that ship!” Rafinha called out.

“Yes, let’s, Rafinha!” Pullum replied.

“Chris! Can you take us to the Flygear dock?”

“Sure, Rani.”

“Wait! Hold it right there!” Principal Miriela screamed in a fluster.

Afterword

First, thank you very much for picking up this book! So, that's the eighth volume of *Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary Squire* ♀. I hope you enjoyed it.

Personally, I'm overjoyed to have written a scene I've been thinking about since way back when I drafted the first volume. There was a lot I had to set up to get to this point, so I feel a sense of accomplishment at having reached the finish line. At first, I expected to get here in five volumes, but it took eight. There were a lot of unexpected things that happened, but I'm proud to have gotten here. Now that I've reached that goal, it seems like I have the go-ahead to keep going, so I'll happily head toward the hidden goal. But if you ask me how to get there... I don't think I've got a clue!

I've never written anything this long, so I'm kind of at a loss for how to continue a long-running series. This is the kind of time I'd want to ask for advice from someone else with experience in the field, but I'm not really close enough to another author to ask!

In terms of communicating with other writers, HJ Bunko used to do a once-a-year awards ceremony where I was able to hear a bunch from the other writers, but that hasn't been happening lately. Ah well, no use crying over spilled milk. It was fun, but at the after-parties there used to be a thing where whoever's book series was next getting an anime had to buy everyone a round, and that would have been me this year. We're talking for twenty or thirty people here too.

Being a loner moonlighter wasn't what I'd call lonely, but as a full-time writer, being a loner is somewhere between lonely and maybe disastrous. Plus, you have to consider the importance of networking and learning about your craft. If you let your perspective become narrow, there's no way to regain your footing when your own style doesn't connect anymore. If I'm doing this for a living, I can't just do well enough for now—I need to figure out how to keep this career going. So, someone, please be my writing friend!

Finally, I'd like to thank my editor N, the illustrator Nagu, and everyone else involved for their hard work and dedication. This volume's cover art was sublime! I ended up changing my wallpaper again!

Goodbye for now!

“Sorry!
Even someone
like me can’t
stand back
and let their
little sister be
beaten!”

Author:
Hayaken
Illustrator:
Nagu

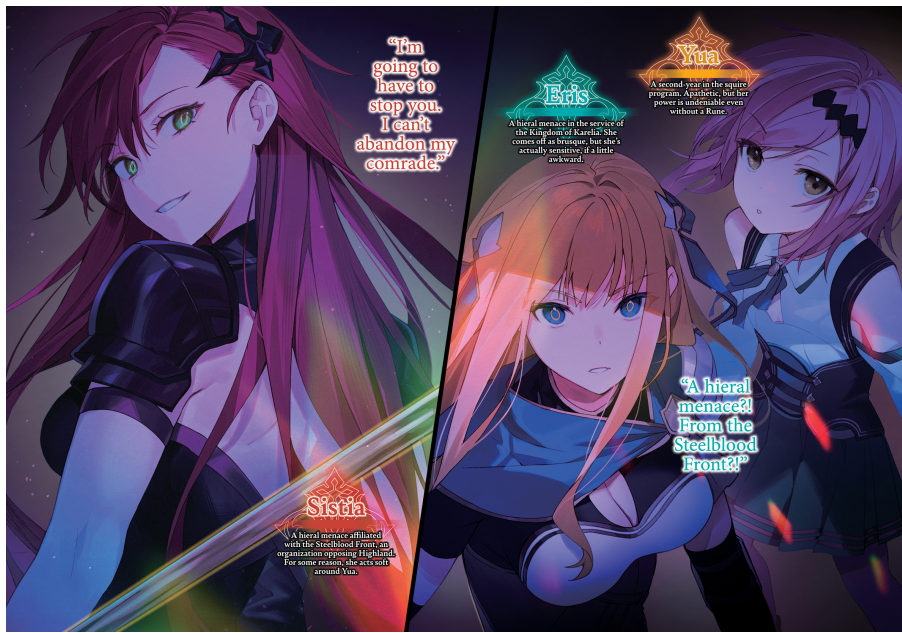
8



Leone

The younger sister of the traitorous holy knight, Leon. She is training to be a knight. Split from Inglis and Rafinha, she is on a mission in Alcard.

Reborn to Master the Blade:
From **Hero-King** to Extraordinary Squire ♀



"I'm going to have to stop you. I can't abandon my comrade."

Sistia

A hired menace affiliated with the Steelblood from an organization opposing Highlands. For some reason, she acts soft around Yua.

Eris

A hired menace in the service of the Kingdom of Karelia. She comes off as brisque, but she's actually sensitive. A little awkward.

Yua

A second-year in the squirrel program. Apathetic, but her power is undeniable even without a Raine.

"A hired menace! From the Steelblood Front?!"



*She
looked
up at
him...and
brought her
hand up to
softly brush
his cheek.*

*“At least
let me
give you
a blessing
before
battle...
Could
you close
your
eyes?”*

Inglis
(Chris)

The former hero-king, reborn in the far future as a girl. She arrives in Ahlemin, where the decisive battle with the Prismer is about to take place...

Bonus Short Stories

Apology

A certain pair of girls were at a banquet in Karelia's royal palace to celebrate the defeat of the Prismers.

"Mnnn, vu geffa feh fu aeh fayshez hli hih! ♪ (Mmm, you get the best food at places like this! ♪)"

"Haff hai, Rahi. Ah haw wuh fayvuh! (That's right, Rani. Our hard work paid off!)"

Nom! Nom, nom, nom!

The food at their table was disappearing. Taken aback, the other banquet attendees blatantly stared at them.

"Wow!"

"They say heroes always live larger than life..."

"And I guess for those two, living it up means eating well."

Eris grimaced. "Just watching that gives me heartburn."

"Same here," Ripple said. The two, in their formal gowns, couldn't help their twitching eyebrows.

The one thing Inglis and Rafinha hadn't touched, though, was a platter several times larger than the others nearby, covered with a silver lid. That one wasn't for them.

Guests around them suddenly started gossiping.

"Oh, it's Sir Rafael!"

"He conceded the defeat of the Prismers, but he still destroyed the most magicite beasts out of anyone!"

"The behavior of a true holy knight!"

"Rahaeh! Owuh hih, owuh hih! (Rafael! Over here, over here!)" Rafinha, beaming, waved to Rafael.

"I don't think he can tell what you're saying," Eris sighed.

"Hey, Rani! Chris!"

"Wow, he understood! I guess siblings are a different breed," Ripple marveled.

Beside them, Inglis rose to greet Rafael. Swallowing her food, she straightened her posture, got down on both knees, and bowed her head. This was the first time she'd seen Rafael since she defeated the Prismers. In other words, the first time she'd seen him since she knocked him unconscious. Now that they were face to face, she felt

she had to apologize properly.

“Chris?! What are you doing all of a sudden?” Rafael asked.

“I need to apologize, Rafael. I’m deeply sorry for deceiving you, and for wounding your pride.”

“Chris, raise your head! Stand up! You’ll get your dress dirty.”

Rafael quickly helped Inglis to her feet. “It’s okay. I was surprised, but I’m not mad. Thanks to your actions, you saved my life. And besides, Lady Eris and Lady Ripple are here enjoying themselves in dresses. That’s never happened before, right? It’s thanks to you that we were able to win without making anyone sad. Thank you so much.” He smiled, a natural one that came to his face effortlessly.

“Rafael...”

“Brother!” Rafinha interjected. “You’re so sweet! I love you!”

“Ha ha ha... Thanks, Rani.”

“C’mon, sit down! We saved some for you!” Rafinha lifted the lid of the large platter. Underneath were grilled morsels of meat—meat from the ancient dragon Fufailbane, which they had brought back from Alcard, cooked over an open flame.

“I’ll feed it to you! Say ‘ahh’!” Rafinha offered.

“Ha ha ha... Mm?! What is this?! This is the most delicious meat I’ve ever tasted!”

“Right?!”

Inglis laughed. “Then I’ll take my turn. Here you go.”

“You too, Chris?! Thanks!”

“I suppose I’ll participate as well,” Eris said.

“Me too, me too!” Ripple cheered. “Isn’t it great to be surrounded by cute girls, Rafael?”

“Ha ha ha... Thanks.” Rafael smiled awkwardly.

Just Who Rin Is

Inglis and Rafinha walked through Karelia’s royal palace in the capital, Chiral.

“Phew, having to meet and greet so many people today was exhausting.”

“It’s not like we have a choice. People are coming from all over the country to celebrate.”

The sigh was Rafinha’s; the reply, Inglis’s.

Karelia was a large country, and the number of royals and nobles was proportionate. Now, they were all gathered under one roof to celebrate the defeat of the Prismers. And it was inevitable that, as they each met Inglis and Rafinha, the two would feel as if it was nothing but endless flattery.

However, there was a key reason that the two had endured so

much over three days and three nights of nonstop socializing.

“Now the fun begins!”

“That’s right, Rani!” Their eyes, glimmering, met.

A gathering of people from across the country meant a gathering of delicacies from across the country. Their work over, a mountainous feast awaited them.

“Let’s eat!”

Plates were stacked with jumbo shrimp boiled whole and cooked in a special sauce. There were baskets full of bread with berries, grapes, apples, and other fruits baked into the dough. Platters were densely packed with thick slices of meat. In the blink of an eye, it was all gone.

“All right, this is the last slice in this basket!” Rafinha exclaimed. “Wait, this isn’t bread! What is it?”

Something else was in the basket that Rafinha reached for. Something small, like a mouse—but humanoid. “Ah?! A magicite beast?!” She picked the creature up. “It looks like Rin?! Ah, this must be—”

“Oh, there he is.”

“Yua?!” Inglis and Rafinha gasped.

“That’s Beanpole.”

“Oh, he got loose?” Rafinha asked.

“I thought he looked familiar,” Inglis said. She hadn’t exactly had time to take a close look during the fight with the Prismers, but his appearance had rung a bell.

“Thanks for finding him. He likes to hide.” Yua took Morris from Rafinha and cradled him to her chest. As she did, though, he made eye contact with Rin, who was peeking from Inglis’s neckline.

“Ugh?!” Inglis involuntarily groaned. While one had once been a surface human at their school, and the other a Highlander, they were both former magicite beasts who had undergone the black-masked man’s treatment. Thus, they could be expected to behave in similar ways.

Rin, perched on Inglis’s neckline, beckoned for Morris to join her.

“Knock it off, Rin!” Inglis barked. Rin sharing her favorite place as a gesture of friendliness was not something Inglis wanted; she didn’t mind if Rin, who had been a woman, scurried under her clothes or nestled in her cleavage, but Morris’s having been a guy made him a no-go. She wouldn’t be able to stand him nestling in there.

Nyoom! Morris escaped from Yua’s arms and hid under a nearby table. Concealing himself behind the tablecloth, he peeked out warily.

Yua looked a bit annoyed. “He’s so quick to run away and disappear like that.”

But Inglis’s eyes shone as she looked at him approvingly. “I knew

you were a gentleman, Morris!”

Squirm, squirm, squirm! Rin squirmed around, taking offense at that comment.

“Eeek! Stop it, Rin!”

“Well, this is just who Rin is...” Rafinha sighed.



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Squire ♀ Volume 8
by Hayaken

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